REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCE
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
7
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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"Not bad."
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Elma
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SPACE MERCENARY
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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.7
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Prologue

I AWOKE TO THE SOUND of a call tone.

Startled awake by the annoying electronic noise, I groped around for the source of the racket while attempting to suppress my brain's desperate pleas for more sleep.

"Eugh." When I saw the name onscreen, I groaned and instantly regretted wrenching open my heavy eyelids. I wanted to ignore it, but I knew I'd only be in deeper shit later if I did. I tapped the answer button.

The shining figure of a certain blonde-haired, red-eyed beauty lit up the dim room. She hardly greeted me, instead opening with a scolding, "Good morni—goodness, what's wrong with you?"

She might've been shining, but she was no divine spirit or anything; this room was equipped with a hologram projector. Even divided by two sets of thick plating and the vast expanse of outer space, we could still see each other like this using two-way projectors.

"I'm the kind of guy who only wears his skivvies to bed," I replied. "If you don't wanna see it, call me at a more civilized hour. Or at least call Mei and have her wake me up."

"I think it's a little late to call it 'early in the morning,'" she replied, her eyes narrowed in irritation. I waved a hand carelessly.

"As much as I'd love to leave everything to Mei, she needs maintenance too… I had to stay up for the night shift yesterday." I let out a huge yawn and looked back at the shining hologram. "So, how can I help you, Lieutenant Colonel Serena Holz?"

Under my irritated, sleep-deprived gaze, she grinned wryly. "I'm still a lieutenant commander."

***

I decided to grudgingly accept that I was awake. I got up, performed my morning routine, and dragged my feet to the cafeteria.

Elma, who looked perfectly content after her own breakfast, glanced at me in surprise and said, “Huh, you’re up early.”

“Serena woke me up… Man, I wish she wouldn’t wake me up for stupid stuff.”

“My condolences.” Elma grinned wryly.

Though Elma was a member of my crew, she wasn’t human like me. She was an elf. Kind of weird for elves to be in a universe full of spaceships and laser fire, right? I’d thought so too when I first met her, but now she seemed totally normal to me. Was this world corrupting me, or was I just adapting to its quirks?

“What?” she demanded. “Don’t stare at me like that.”

“Just thinking about how beautiful you are, Elma.”

“Jeez… Compliment me all you want, but all you’re getting is coffee.” Elma sighed, stood up, and padded over to our main chef in the corner of the room: the Steel Chef 5.

Availing myself of her kindness, I took a seat at the table and watched her from behind. Long, pointed ears poked out of her silky silver hair. *Yep, that’s an elf all right.* Said elf was dressed head to toe in sci-fi mercenary gear and had a laser gun slung at her hip. Honestly, it did still look a little odd.

While I was ogling Elma brewing coffee with the automatic cooker, two more voices greeted me from the cafeteria door.

“Whoa, someone didn’t sleep long.”

“Good morning to you.”

I looked over and spotted two small girls with bright-colored hair, one red and one blue.

“Morning,” I replied. “Serena called me and woke me up.”

“Aww, man. That’s rough,” said Tina, the red-haired one. She took a seat next to me. Her younger twin sister, the blue-haired Wiska, sat on her

other side. “Elma, hon, bring some tea for me too! I want strawberry jam in mine.”

“Yeah, yeah. And Wiska, what would you like?”

“Oh, umm… Same as Sis, please. Thank you.”

Elma waved to the hesitant Wiska and punched her order into the automatic cooker.

“What’s the plan today, girls?” I asked them.

“Mm…” Tina thought for a moment. “Well, we finished all the maintenance on the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* yesterday. I was just gonna read and watch holo-movies today, I guess. How ’bout you, Wiska?”

“Hmm… Some research, maybe. Oh, Sis, have you finished your report? If we don’t report to them by the time we reach the capital, we’ll be in trouble.”

“Ack! I forgot…” Tina wailed in despair and collapsed face-down on the table. “Aah, jeez. Guess it’s paperwork for me today… Here I thought I’d get a break.”

These two might’ve looked like little girls, but actually they were both full-grown dwarves. Maybe you have an image of dwarves as short, stout little guys with beards and stuff, but the dwarven women in this universe looked like middle-schoolers throughout adulthood. Don’t be fooled, though; they were real adults. The ages listed on their IDs were almost the same as mine.

These girls were full of mysteries, but they did have some dwarven features that made sense to me. For example, they were strong. I’d tried arm wrestling with both of them, and I didn’t stand a chance. In fact, just one of the twins could probably beat me in a fight with one hand tied behind her back. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw them lifting 120-kilogram barbells like nothing in the training room. You can’t blame me for wondering what the hell their muscles were made of.

Of course, their dwarf-like qualities didn’t end at physical traits. Well… Maybe this was a physical thing, too? Just like those stereotypical dwarves, they loved alcohol. Compared to me, a lightweight, they were

awe-inspiring drinkers. How could they fit so much food and drink into such tiny bodies?

Sitting there pondering their secrets wouldn't get me very far, so I decided to ask about more concrete things.

"Reports, huh? What kind of stuff do you write in those?"

"Mm? Lots of stuff. But the reports are mostly collected data on the ships we've repaired. Why they're messed up and what happened, how we fixed them, the materials and parts we used, how they were broken… Stuff like that. There're also analyses of unknown products and customized parts when we find them, daily health statuses, results of stress exams… Basically a daily log, though with some stuff omitted for privacy. Such a paaaain, though…" Tina turned her head to the side, face still pressed to the table, and poked her lip out at me in a pout.

"That's what you get for procrastinating, Sis."

"You just take work too seriously, Wis!"

"Now, now. No fighting," Elma said, bringing our orders over on a tray: my (synthesized) coffee and the sisters' (fake) tea with (so-called) strawberry jam. I'd been wondering what they'd use the jam-like stuff for, but apparently they put it in their mouth and then took a sip of tea. I guess it was pretty much like the Japanese idea of Russian tea.

"Mm, that's good," I moaned. "Morning coffee just hits different."

"It's full of milk and sugar, though," Elma mused. "You didn't strike me as a guy with a sweet tooth, Hiro."

"I'm not a fan of bitter foods, is all. Bitter stuff and really sour stuff aren't for me." It was just a matter of taste; I couldn't help it. Some people might enjoy their coffee black, but I had an immature palate that couldn't handle that—it tasted better with milk and sugar.

"So what did Serena want?"

"Not much, as far as I can tell. She asked if my sword training was going well, if I was getting proper etiquette lessons, and other stuff like that."

"That's all?"

“That’s all,” I confirmed. “I couldn’t believe she woke me up for that crap.”

What was her deal? Even if it was coincidence that she called after I’d happened to spend the night working, that conversation wasn’t worth an early-morning wake-up. Elma and the twins didn’t seem to understand Serena’s intentions, either; they exchanged glances.

“Ya think maybe she just wanted to see your face, hon?” Tina suggested.

“Scary if true,” I said.

“Scary…?” Wiska grinned nervously.

“It’s pretty dang scary that a lieutenant commander of the Imperial Fleet would call me in the morning just for that, right?”

“Don’t ya think you’re being a little mean?”

“Listen, Tina. I’ve made it very clear by now—to her and everyone else—that I’m not interested in that kind of relationship with Serena. So why is she calling me at the crack of dawn? That’s the stuff of horror movies right there.”

“I-is it that big a deal…? But what’s yer problem with her, anyway? She’s a high-ranking military officer from a noble family. That’s marryin’ up, ain’t it?”

Yeah, marrying up. I could see that, but only if I was accepted into the family…and that’s a big if.

“Think about it,” I said. “You’re right—she’s the daughter of a noble, and a successful military officer. The moment some rando mercenary nobody’s ever heard of touches her, her daddy or granddaddy is gonna *disappear* said mercenary. I mean, if I was them, that’s what I’d do. I’d make mincemeat out of the guy.”

“Well, er… I guess that’s a possibility…” Elma said, gazing off into the distance.

See?

“Is that how it goes?” Tina raised an eyebrow. “As long as she’s fine with it, why does it matter?”

“Hmm, I wonder…” Wiska said. “Nobles typically marry strategically or are betrothed from childhood, right? Butting in could lead to a lot of trouble on that front.”

“Oooh, makes sense. You’re so smart, Wis.”

“It’s only a guess.”

While the twins chattered away peacefully, I noticed Elma was looking away in silence. *Come to think of it, her background is still a total mystery… She’s always weird when it comes to stuff like this. Maybe something’s on her mind.*

When Elma noticed my eyes on her, she looked a little shaken and scared. “Wh-what do you want?” she demanded.

“Nothing, really. Just thinking about how beautiful you are.”

“Y-you already said that… You’re not getting anything else from me.” She blushed and looked away again.

“Aww, lucky Elma. What about me, hon? Whatcha thinkin’ about me?” Tina wheedled.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re cute, too, Tina. And you are, too, Wiska. I didn’t mean to make you feel left out.”

“Ah ha ha, thank you…” giggled Wiska.

“I dunno, that felt pretty weak…” Tina grumbled despite the compliment, smacking me on the arm.

I just took a sip of my now-cold coffee—or rather, my super-sweet café au lait.

Chapter 1:
The Truth About Elma

"ELMA IS ACTING WEIRD, you say?"

"That's what I think. Know anything about it?"

After a quick breakfast in the cafeteria, I completed my daily training and freshened up in the shower before paying a visit to Mimi's room. Her room was all dolled up with girly stuff, but at the same time, it was surprisingly chic. My room was minimalistic and plain, but hers had cool stickers and posters on the walls, all tastefully arranged. There were also chained accessories, gun belts, and other gear hanging from the walls. The laser gun I'd bought her was displayed on a handgun rack on the nightstand next to her bed. I had to admit, Mimi had pretty good taste in decor.

"Hmm…" Mimi cocked her head. "Now that you mention it, she has been a little down ever since we left for the capital."

Back when I'd first brought her aboard, Mimi had been mentally and physically wrung out. These days, she was a vivacious young woman thanks to plentiful food and regular exercise. Perhaps her daily work as an operator was contributing to her good health, as well.

"So no idea, huh?"

"Sorry. I just can't think of what might be getting her down."

"Hey, you don't have to apologize. It's my job as captain to look after my crew. It's just… Hmm, I dunno what to do. Should I ask her directly, or should I go to Mei first?"

"Mei seems like she might know something."

"That's Mei for you…" I agreed. Not to brag since I designed her, but her specs were so high that it felt like cheating. I wouldn't be surprised if she eventually knew us better than we knew ourselves. Frankly, I felt like Mei could handle pretty much anything. "On the other hand, Elma deserves her privacy… Part of me is hesitant to dig up her secrets if she doesn't want to share on her own."

“You’re right about that…”

Maybe Elma had her own reasons for bottling up her emotions instead of telling us about them. Maybe talking to us wouldn’t help, or maybe it would make the problem worse. Neither of those would be out of the question.

“But I dunno. You know how she is. If she had a personal problem that she thought would cause trouble for us, doesn’t she seem like the type to hide it to keep from making waves?” I asked.

“Elma is a determined one, true.”

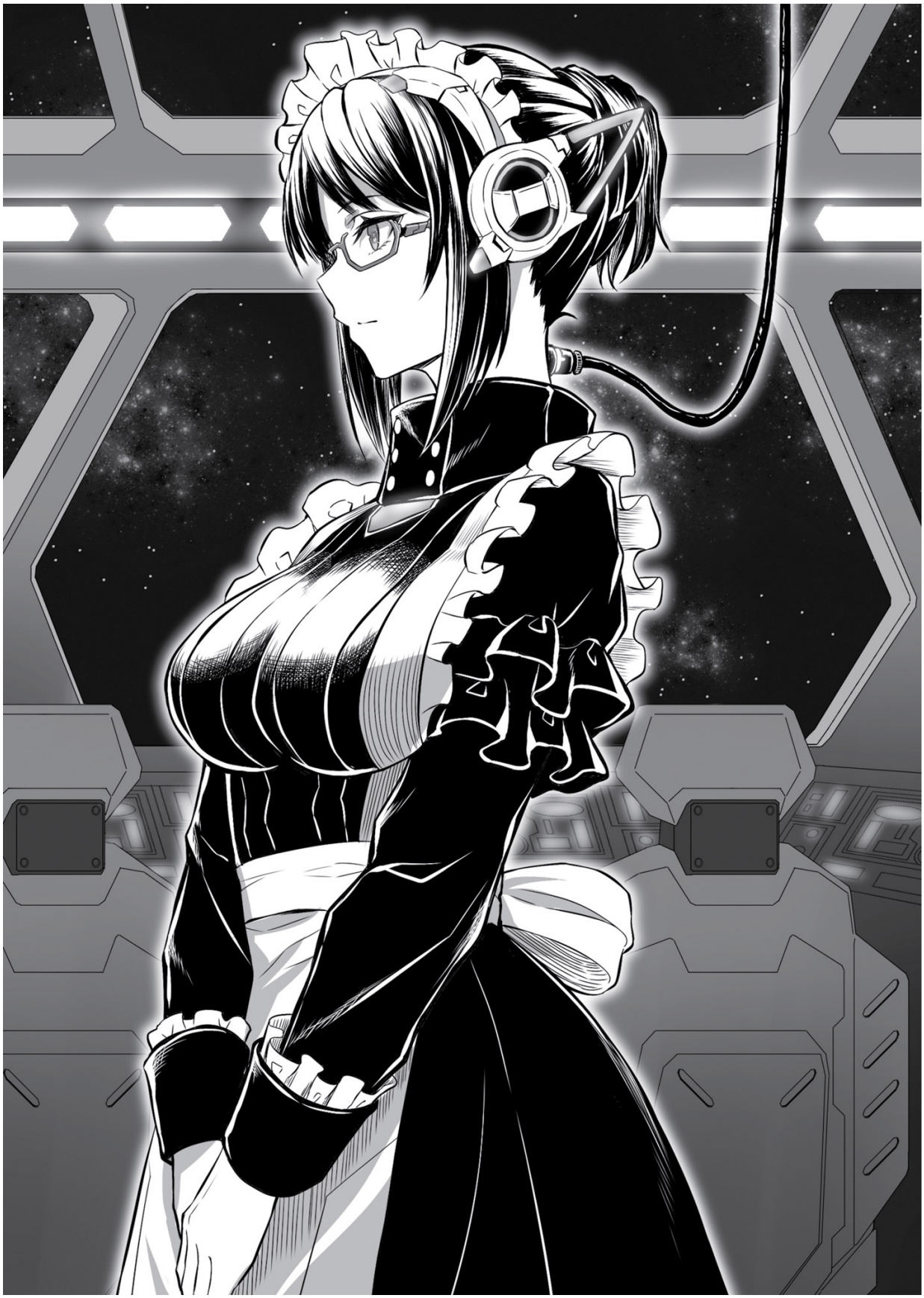
Mimi and I looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

***

“And this brings you to me?”

“That’s right. Do you know anything, Mei?”

After we’d reached an agreement, Mimi and I visited the cockpit of the *Black Lotus*. There we met Mei, the super-high-spec Maidroid with flowing black hair, a huge rack, and glasses (all to my taste). Her positronic brain allowed her to operate this whole carrier ship pretty much solo.



“I don’t know of any specific issues that would cause Miss Elma worry at the moment.”

“Damn…” I was a bit disappointed. I guess even Mei didn’t know *everything*.

“However, I think I can hypothesize with a reasonable degree of accuracy.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It seems Miss Elma’s family resides in the capital. So any emotional turbulence may be related to them.”

“Her family is in the capital?” Mimi seemed surprised.

“Well, I had a feeling it was something like that,” I said. “She does know a little *too* much about nobility.” I’d had a sort of theory about this forming in my head for a while now, that maybe Elma was actually a noble from some important family. I’d been assuming she had family in the capital, since she’d started acting weird the moment we set out for it.

“Elma’s father is what is known as a viscount of the robe. He does indeed reside in the capital,” Mei said.

“Viscount of the robe…” Mimi repeated Mei’s shocking revelation in a deadpan voice, as if she was having some kind of out-of-body experience.

I had to guess that “of the robe” part meant these were nobles who held their title due to some job or position in the capital, rather than because they held land. I’d thought the ruling class of the Grakkan Empire consisted only of humans despite the empire’s diversity, but it looked like I was wrong there. It really was made up of all sorts.

“So out of all the possibilities I’d imagined, it’s the most annoying one…” I sighed.

“Huh? Huh? Does that mean Elma was a noble all along?” Mimi asked.

“In terms of bloodline, yes. However, her brother will be the one to inherit the family fortune and title. She also has an elder sister, so I find it extremely unlikely that it will ever fall to her to carry on the family legacy.”

“I see…”

If her brother married and had children, that would make him even more likely to inherit everything. As long as nothing insane happened, like her siblings and their families all meeting with some huge accident or something, that title would never find its way to Elma.

"If Elma gives up her right to succession," Mei continued, "she will be treated as a commoner, though she will still be a first-class Imperial citizen with land-owning rights. From what I've found, no paperwork or disinheritance proceedings have been submitted yet, so Elma should still officially be a member of said noble family."

"I see…" Looking back on it, I'd said to her face several times now that noble girls were trouble, and I didn't want to get close to them. Maybe she was worried about what would happen if I found out or something.

"Based on this information, one might expect her to be worrying about how to inform her family of her relationship with you, how to explain to you that she entered that relationship while concealing her background, and what comes next for the two of you."

"Okay, got it, got it. Seems like I should talk to Elma about it now before we reach the capital." It was best to be swift and frank at times like this. I hated situations where people were stuck tiptoeing around each other, walking on eggshells to try to be respectful of each other's feelings. "All right. Cancel all my plans today. I'm off to talk to Elma."

"Understood. I will adjust your plans from tomorrow onward to cover for today's changes."

"Be gentle, please."

Good luck, future me. At least you won't die, right? Right? The Black Lotus's medical pods are cutting edge! Ha ha ha ha! Sigh…

***

On the way back from the cockpit of the *Black Lotus*, I used our messaging app to send a few messages, and bam, we had an appointment. *Man, modern technology sure is convenient,* I thought idly to myself as I made my way to Elma's room.

Mimi had said she'd stay in the cockpit to discuss some things with Mei, but that was probably just her being considerate. The path from the cockpit to the residential area was long; she probably wanted to give me time to think about what I wanted to say.

"Not that I need it," I mused to myself. I'd already reached a clear conclusion—I had no intention of abandoning Elma.

Sure, I can't honestly say that there isn't just a little selfish desire to have her to myself in there. But that's not the whole story. Sure, some might say it's the right thing to do to let her go under the pretense of not wanting to deal with her family…but doesn't that feel a little too mean? Even I'm not that heartless.

I was still thinking about all this when I arrived at Elma's door.

"Okay, knock knock, anyone home?" I called out.

Elma's annoyed voice came through the speaker. "It's open."

Sorry. When things get too serious, the cowardly side of me wants to act dumb to bring some balance to the situation. Mentally apologizing to no one in particular, I touched the panel beside the door to open it and stepped inside.

Elma's room was surprisingly *cute*. That was the first thing that came to mind, at least, as I noticed a few plushies here and there that matched the one-eyed alien and cat-rabbit-thing she and Mimi used as stickers in our messaging app. Make no mistake, though. Elma wasn't devoted to the cute and fancy look; the wine rack on the wall that stored her liquor at the perfect temperature and the fridge packed full of cold beer made for quite the striking contrast.

"Jeez, what? You come into a girl's room and just start looking all over the place… Did you want to talk or what?"

"Oh, yeah."

Elma was sitting on her bed, so I decided to pull up a chair at a respectful distance. It was…comfortable enough. These kinds of chairs were made to automatically fold themselves into the floor during battles.

Argh, my mind keeps going in weird directions. Bad Hiro. You gotta focus.

“So, Mei told me some things about your family,” I began.

“Oh… Okay, I see. I guess it makes sense that she looked into that.” Elma grinned in resignation. We both knew that Mei would do *everything*, with or without our knowledge, so she wasn’t exactly surprised.

“Your father’s some ‘viscount of the robe,’ yeah?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Sorry.”

“I don’t know what you’re apologizing for—but no problem. All is forgiven!” I puffed out my chest grandiosely.

She sputtered and laughed. “*Pfft*, weirdo.”

So far, so good.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I don’t really care that your family is nobility or whatever. I would never abandon you for a stupid reason like that. Not after what we’ve been through.”

“I appreciate your saying so, but you know it’s gonna be a whole pain, right?”

“Well, if you say so, I’m sure you’re right. I’m not exactly looking forward to it either, but it still doesn’t tip the scales against you. Do you understand what I’m saying here?”

“I dunnooo. You might have to say it more clearly for me to understand.” Elma gazed into my eyes. *So you do know what I mean. Good grief.*

“I’m not letting you go that easily,” I said firmly. “I’ll gladly deal with whatever annoyances come our way for you. Heck, I’d even give up my awards and reputation just to kidnap you and run away together. Now do you get it?”

“Yeah, I get it. Loud and clear.” Elma smiled and opened her arms to welcome me into her embrace. “The happy couple is supposed to hug and kiss after the big confession, right?”

“You’re watching too many holo-movies, don’tcha think?” I stood up from my seat, scooched in next to Elma, and pulled her delicate body into a hug. *Yeah, that’s calming… I could never let her go.*

***

But we didn't do anything particularly naughty. We just snuggled in her bed together while she told me about her family.

"So basically, my dad is an official with the administrative bureau of Imperial Family Affairs."

"Yeah, I have no idea what that means."

"Figures. As the name implies, Imperial Family Affairs is an office that governs all the affairs of the imperial family. As for the administrative bureau, they manage every matter related to the family and their official residence. For example, they do the regular maintenance and manage the facilities and transportation used by the family."

Oh, okay. I think I'm kinda getting a picture of how this works.

"That seems pretty broad, right?" I asked.

"It is. There are tons of different posts, with tons of people working in them. My dad works for the office managing the imperial palace's garden. That's a really respected job, y'know."

"Hmm, I think I get it. I guess when you're managing stuff that the imperial family sees day-to-day, you tend to be regarded more highly." So her dad was like an imperial gardener. It was hard for me to understand how big a deal that was, but if he was a viscount, he was almost certainly worlds apart from a commoner like me. "What's your old man like?"

"Well… He's kind, but stubborn. The whole reason I ran away from home in the first place was because I got in a blow-out argument with my hardheaded dad."

"Huh… So I'm the rando nobody who brings back runaway daughters, huh? Sounds like a real nice first impression!" *A runaway daughter comes home with an uncivilized mercenary,* and *he's already deflowered her. If I were her dad, I'd be screaming and loading my shotgun!*

"Ah ha ha, right. But you never know…" she said suggestively.

"Hm? Do you see a ray of hope?"

“Hiro, you’re still the hero who won a Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. Plus, when we get to the capital, you’ll be awarded with either the First-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance or Second-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance—a Gold Star or Silver Star. My father may be stubborn, but he’s also a steadfast believer in the empire and the authority of the imperial family.”

“Oh, so basically you think my awards will save me?”

“That’s right. Mercenaries with the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge are treated as honorary knights here in the empire, and if you have a Gold Star, you’ll be an honorary viscount. Even a Silver Star gets you to the status of a baron. A Gold Star puts you on equal footing with my dad, so he can’t get too bossy with you. Heck, if you’re equal to a baron he still can’t be too brazen. That would undermine the authority of the empire and the imperial family.”

“I see, I see. In that case, I guess I don’t have to worry.”

It felt like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. *Guess that’s what they mean when they say hard work pays off. Or maybe it’s more along the lines of a cloud with a silver lining? I never thought these annoying awards would actually come in handy.*

“Hold your horses. It’s still a little early to relax,” she warned.

“What?”

“My mom and sister won’t be a problem either, but my big brother…” Elma looked away.

“Big brother?” An unpleasant chill crept down my spine. I felt a few beads of sweat trickle down, too.

“Umm, so… He’s like extremely overprotective of his sisters, and…”

“Whoa! No more. I don’t wanna hear any more.”

“He’s a sword supremacist.”

Aww, man.

***

“I thought you canceled all your plans for the day?”

“Yeah, but sometimes a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Mm.” Mei cocked her head—a rare reaction from her.

I had vowed in my heart that I would do whatever it took to survive. After all, I’d promised Elma that I would stay with her through anything. And I was a man who kept his promises. *Ha ha ha… Haah.*

Incidentally, when Elma said that her older brother was a “sword supremacist,” that meant he was one of those nuts who took pride in using a sword to kill their foes despite the ready availability of killer laser beams in this universe. It wasn’t easy to explain the details without getting into a lecture on Grakkan Empire nobility, but basically, these noble houses had spent their money on biotechnology and cybernetics in order to amplify their physical abilities, allowing them to deflect laser beams with the swing of a sword. Sometimes, they could even reflect them back at the attacker. These nobles could use their technologically enhanced swords to cut through regular armor and power armor alike.

Apparently, all nobles had these abilities to some extent. But those who called themselves sword supremacists were the ones who’d *really* mastered them.

“I am happy to see that you are motivated, Master,” Mei said. “This will have a positive effect on your learning ability.”

“Right? Great, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. As such, I will be doubling the difficulty of your training.”

“Bwuh?”

And thus my days of hell began.

Chapter 2:
To the Capital

JUST LIKE THAT, three days passed after my conversation with Elma.

"M-Master Hiro, are you okay?" Mimi asked. I guess she found the image of me face-down on the table looking like my soul had fled my body slightly worrying. *You're such a good girl, Mimi. I'm gonna cry.*

"Yeah, I'm fine… At least, I'm alive…" *I mean, I just cracked all my bones, vomited up blood, peed blood, and stuff like that. Sometimes, just surviving is a victory. Ha ha ha, man, but don't those times just suck?* "You know how in superhero comics they can feel killing intent and dodge sneak attacks based on that feeling alone?"

"Huh? U-um, yes, I think?" My sudden remark clearly took Mimi by surprise, but I kept talking.

"I thought that was all B.S. Just fiction, y'know? But now I can see it's actually real…and even weirder, it turns out I've already learned how to do it."

"I-is that true?"

"Yeah… I experienced it firsthand."

The ability to read an enemy's slightest movements in order to predict where and how they would attack was *basically* the same as the ability to feel malice. It was almost a kind of precognition based on either instincts honed by mountains of experience, top-notch information processing, or maybe even a combination of the two. Probably. This was the conclusion I'd reached through my training with Mei.

And the thing was—I already had this ability. The foundation of it was cultivated through my FPS gaming experience at home, which blossomed in my Stella Online gameplay and was further refined through the real space battles I'd experienced here.

When I battled in my ship, I used the limited information from radar, my own sense of sight, damage reports displayed on the ship's hologram,

alarms, and the like to grasp the state of the space around us. Then I used that information to minimize damages through careful handling while delivering fatal blows to enemies.

Swordsmanship was fundamentally the same. Instead of a ship's sensors, you felt the vibrations in the air and floor through your skin and feet, watched the enemy's motions and line of sight with your own eyes, and listened to the rustling of their clothing and sounds of their footwork to predict their next move. You evaded danger by moving your own body and used your blade to deal blows in vulnerable places.

Every day, Mei had whaled on me until I felt like I was on the verge of death. But her harsh treatment had allowed me to bring my blossoming malice-sensing abilities, spatial awareness, and the rest of my senses to bear on my swordsmanship—and today it had finally paid off. I'd vomited blood tens of times every day without dealing a single counterattack before this, but today that number had been brought down to just seven.

"By the way, sorry to change the subject here…" I groaned.

"Yes?"

"Mimi, *you're* not gonna turn out to be the daughter of some duke or baron, right?" Serena was the daughter of a marquis, Chris was the daughter of a count, and Elma was the daughter of a viscount. At this rate, I wouldn't have been surprised if Mimi turned out to be some kind of glittering blueblood as well, so I decided to ask just in case.

"Whaaat? Of course not. I'm a pure-blooded commoner. My mom and dad were definitely just colonists."

"Ha ha ha, of course. Like that could ever happen," I laughed.

No matter what, I didn't have to worry about Mimi. If she was nobility, she wouldn't have been left homeless and destitute when her parents passed. Her parents were regular residents of a space colony.

"But…" I began hesitantly. "What about your grandma?"

"Hmm, I guess I don't know…" Mimi furrowed her brow. "I don't know much about my grandpa, either."

According to Mimi, her grandmother had been a woman of many mysteries. Mimi herself had only met her once as a child, and thinking

about it now, she was apparently a lot like Elma. On top of that, Mimi remembered her looking quite young. In other words, despite Mimi's hazy memories, it was likely that her grandma had been a mercenary or a space traveler. She was also probably rolling in it—she must have had enough money to afford some advanced anti-aging treatment, either biotechnology or cybernetics.

"Still, I think it's pretty unlikely that Grandma and Grandpa were *nobles*," Mimi said. "If so, it'd be a little weird that my parents were normal colonists."

"Fair enough."

Nobles had a whole lot of authority here in the Grakkan Empire. Even knights, the lowest of the low-ranked nobles, had special privileges beyond those of commoners. People typically wouldn't give up those privileges without good reason…normal people, anyway.

"See? Besides, do I look like a noble to you?"

"Well, you *are* cute… If you wore a noblewoman's dress, I think you'd look the part."

"That would just be the clothes making the woman. I'm not as put-together as Elma, and I'm nowhere near as refined as Serena or Chris."

"Think so? I thought you looked great in that gothic Lolita dress. Wish you'd wear it again…"

"Huh? U-umm, I don't think it looks that good on me…"

The way she blushed and wriggled in embarrassment was so adorable that I could've died.

After that, I wore Mimi down and managed to convince her to try on a few of the cute outfits we'd bought a while back. This definitely soothed the mental wounds I'd sustained from Mei's harsh training.

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As I trained with everything I had to avoid being instantly murdered by any violent nobles, the *Black Lotus*, with *Krishna* on board, proceeded

with Lieutenant Commander Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit toward the capital system of the Grakkan Empire.

From the time I woke up to the time I fell lifeless into bed, I'd throw up blood and faint over and over. Even when I fainted, Mei would slap some headgear on me to help me learn in my sleep. This messed with my sense of time, and ten days had passed before I knew it.

"No matter how many times I see these things, the size is just jaw-dropping," I mused.

"It sure is big…" Mimi agreed.

"Whoooa. I've never seen one of these!" Tina chimed in.

"Hmm, it is big… I bet I could make it smaller, though." Wiska's comment was a little different from the others… But regardless, we'd arrived at the Neepak System, where the gateway awaited us.

We'd apparently gone through the Dexar System, where Chris's family lived, along the way, but between Mei's efforts to trounce me and the constant etiquette lessons, I'd been too occupied to notice. But we'd really only passed through, so it wasn't as if I could drop in on them anyway.

"That gateway should take us directly to the capital, right?" Mimi asked.

"Correct," Elma answered. "Thanks to the gateway network, the capital is effectively pretty close despite its true distance."

"But that's only for people who can freely use gateways, right?" I added.

"Yeah, fair," she shrugged.

Gateways were majorly convenient. They allowed one to travel thousands or tens of thousands of light-years in an instant—but they weren't freely usable by all. Even nobles needed to jump through a few hoops to use them. Mercs, traveling merchants, and other commoners almost never got permission.

Opportunities to use gateways in SOL had also been extremely limited, to the point that I had basically no memory of ever using them myself. I'd heard you could get permission if you had a great relationship

with a galactic empire that owned one, but as someone who played a rando mercenary in-game, I never had the chance.

"Most people never leave the colony they were born and raised in," Mimi mused. "The capital really is so far away…"

"Yep. The only people leavin' their colonies would be interstellar shipbuilders, like us, and merchants, for the most part."

"Soldiers, too," Wiska added. "How do you become a mercenary and leave your home, anyway?"

"Uhh, I hear there are training schools or something," I answered. "I wouldn't know myself." I felt like I'd heard something like that at the mercenary guild. Still, I doubted many people became mercs just for the thrill of it. If not for my *Krishna*—if I'd just been tossed into a colony with nothing but the clothes on my back—I didn't know if I'd ever have become a mercenary.

"Well, how did you become a merc, hon?"

"Er… It just kind of happened, I guess?"

I'd woken up in the *Krishna* drifting in space and found myself immediately attacked by space pirates. Everything after that just flowed into the next thing, and somehow I'd become a mercenary. Or rather, I was made into a mercenary. *Thanks, Elma.*

"Just kind of happened…? Oooh, right, you lost your memories. My bad," Tina apologized.

"No need to apologize. I think I'm a pretty lucky guy." It felt a little too sappy to say it out loud, but thanks to being a merc, I'd gotten to meet Mimi, Elma, Mei, Chris, Tina, and Wiska. Heck, even Lieutenant Commander Serena—okay, maybe not her. Anyway, I'd met all my friends. As for Dr. Shouko… Just remembering her made my butt hurt.

"Hey, the line's moving. Looks like it's our turn."

"Ooh, I can't wait! What's it like?"

"I can't wait either, Sis."

Sorry to burst your bubble, but you're really setting yourself up for disappointment. I glanced at Mimi, who was looking at the twins with the

same sympathetic eyes. *Ha ha ha. Mimi was just as disappointed last time.*

The fleet sailed forward, and a single ship entered the distorted glow within the giant structure. It really was a mysterious sight—as we watched, the corvettes and destroyers up ahead glowed and disappeared.

"O-ooh… Here it comes, Wis."

"S-Sis…"

They took each other's hands as they watched the distortion approaching. The cruiser right in front of us flashed and disappeared.

And then…

"Huh? That was it?"

"That's…a little disappointing."

Without so much as the usual FTL boom, the psychedelic colorful hyperspace of hyperdrive, or even a flash of light, the holo-display screen changed.

"Yep. That's basically what real warping is like," I said.

"Whoooa… That's wild." Tina was more impressed than I'd expected.

"I understand the concept logically, but it really is incredible. Hmm, I'll have to step up my own work." Wiska seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Sometimes I didn't understand this girl. That engineer brain of hers seemed a little *too* active.

"Anyway, we're here safe and sound," Elma said. "Welcome to the capital star system of the Grakkan Empire. That over there is the capital city Grakius, where my family lives."

"Hmm?" I furrowed my brow at the holo-display image. Given its size, the thing I was looking at must've been a planet. But there didn't seem to be any visible oceans on its surface; in fact, I didn't see *any* natural features. The whole planet's surface was covered in artificial structures. "Ecumenopolis? Did they really do it?"

"Wow, that's an old word. They just call them urban planets these days."

"I see… So that's the capital? And that means…?"

“Yep.” Elma grinned at me. “The whole urban planet is the capital city Grakius. Welcome to the heart of the empire, its flourishing capital.”

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Before heading into the capital city proper, we would be stopping at one of the colonies set up in the system, Grakius Secundus. Here, we would have our luggage checked and ships inspected. We could also do all the necessary paperwork to dock at the capital city.

In other words, Grakius Secundus basically served as the castle gate guarding the capital. Any merchants bringing goods into the capital did all their business at one of these colonies and took off again without touching down in the city itself. Why, you ask? On top of the complex hoops you had to jump through to land in the capital directly, the docking fees were exorbitant. Though probably not as expensive as the resort system.

Once we’d successfully docked in the colony and Mei came down to the cafeteria, I finally asked, “So, what should I do?”

Part of me felt bad that, as the ship’s captain, I couldn’t exhibit leadership at a time like this. But frankly, I’d been practically forced to come by Serena. I was pretty much just along for the ride. I figured it was her fault for dragging me here without giving proper orders. *Or wait, could it be that instead of her not giving me orders, I just wasn’t listening? Maybe that’s it.*

“Lieutenant Commander Serena has stated that the military will take care of all ceremonial proceedings, so the landing procedures will also be under their supervision. I would personally recommend checking in at this colony’s mercenary guild,” said Mei.

“The mercenary guild? Y’know what, Serena *did* say I should lean on the guild when we got to the capital city. But what exactly should I lean on them for? I have no idea.”

“It may be best to ask them for the specifics,” Mei replied. “The mercenary guild of a capital system should be able to provide guidance on how mercenaries ought to deal with nobility.”

“Oh, you don’t say?” *If that’s Mei’s recommendation, then she’s probably right. Might as well go take a look.* “Okay, guess I’ll go and see what’s up. Mimi and Elma, do you wanna come?”

“Sure. We need to get dresses and accessories before the ceremony, so we’ll explain the situation to the guild and have them recommend some shops.”

“*Gulp*. Dresses…?” Mimi looked pained. She wasn’t a big fan of frilly dresses, after all. But even if she didn’t like them much, I thought they looked pretty nice on her.

“Then we’ll come with ya—” Tina started, but she was quickly interrupted.

“Sis, we need to contact the branch office.”

“Aww, can’t it wait a little?”

“I don’t want them getting snarky with us later.”

“Ugh… I hear the ones at the capital are the worst.”

It seemed the twins had some business to take care of with Space Dwergr. If the way they were acting was anything to go by, though, it seemed like they didn’t want to deal with the capital branch. Maybe Space Dwergr had different factions too? It kind of seemed that way. *Too scary for me. I’m staying away from that.*

“What’ll you do, Mei?” I asked.

“I will remain on the ship. That will allow me to quickly respond in the event that anyone contacts us.”

“Got it. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Please do.” Mei smiled ever so slightly. *Yeah, her expressions have gotten a lot softer these days. Though you probably wouldn’t notice unless you knew her as well as I do.*

“Okay, let’s go—”

“Hiro, go to your room right now and get the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. And your swords,” Elma demanded.

“…Do I have to?”

“You do. It’ll make it a lot easier to explain our circumstances. Hop to it.”

“Aww, man…”

“I think you look cooler with them!” Mimi piped up.

“Ugh.”

In the end, Elma and Mimi forced me to wear my big stupid medal on my chest and equip my two swords before we left for the mercenary guild. Totally ridiculous. I would’ve been just fine with my laser gun.

EX:
Why I Was Taken In

"WHAT?! H-hold on a second! The money is one thing, but you're only giving me a *week* to pay it off?! What's the deal?!"

"What's the deal? Well, you interfered with a battle in progress, destroyed weapons belonging to the military, and even wounded multiple people in the process. Normally, you'd be imprisoned right away," that stupid, fat soldier said with an evil grin. "Look, if you can pay off 37,000,000 Ener in a week, you're effectively off scot-free. Isn't that generous? I hear you mercenaries make plenty of money."

"Well, yeah, I can make thirty-seven mil, but not in a week! Besides, my ship is totaled. How am I supposed to do any business?!"

"It isn't our job to figure that out. We can't take partial payments, either. You need to return the sum in full by 15:00 one week from now. Otherwise, you will be imprisoned as a felon under article 4, paragraph 7 of the Imperial Fleet Code." The pig wearing military gear smirked, ignored my protests, and left.

***

"That piece of shit! I'm gonna kill him, I swear!"

After being unceremoniously booted out of the military office on Tarmein Prime, I screamed and stomped on the metal alloy floor. The guard at the gate looked shocked by my cussing, but I didn't care. If I couldn't scrounge together that money, I was done for.

The Tarmein System had a prison colony, Tarmein Tertius. Most of the felons there were former pirates and mercenaries. People like me couldn't exactly shake hands with the inmates; after all, most of the pirates were stuck there thanks to me and my fellow mercenaries.

"I have to do something about this, and fast…"

Just imagining what would happen if I ended up there was terrifying. Space pirates weren't *all* men, but most of them were. If a woman like me were thrown in there… *No. Just don't think about that. You have to focus on getting the money so you can avoid the worst.*

"Worst case, I can ask Dad… No. That's not gonna work."

No matter what, that money wouldn't make it in time. Even if I used hyperspace and gateway communication optimally, it would take at least ten days for a message from me to reach him. I'd be in that prison colony long before he even saw it.

"But I guess it's insurance…"

I might not reach him quick enough to prevent me from going to prison, but maybe he could get me out afterward. It was at least worth considering.

"Not that I have much of a right to come begging for help now." I grinned wryly at my predicament. Five years ago, I had stolen my brother's small ship and run away from home. At the time there were a lot of reasons: an engagement to someone I didn't love, hatred for my life as a noble's daughter, and my inability to tolerate being surrounded by fakeness and vanity all the time. I yearned for freedom and the mercenary lifestyle I saw in holo-movies. Long story short, I abandoned my life as a noble young lady and ran away. In the process, I essentially spat on the people and places that had raised me.

I spent my first year in space constantly running from my dad and brother. Looking back, though, my brother was definitely going easy on me. He might've even interfered with dad's attempts. He'd hated my intended more than I did, after all.

A year and a half after I ran away, I finally made it to a faraway star system, where they stopped pursuing me. That was when I began my mercenary work, succeeding and failing in turn as I did my best to rise up in the universe under my own power. There were lots of times when I thought I couldn't go on, but I'd managed to overcome every struggle—until today.

"Like hell I'll give up now."

I'd cast aside my family and obligations for this life of freedom. How could I abandon it so easily? I roused my faltering heart and decided to see

what I could do.

***

I sighed.

This past week, I'd used every one of my connections in a mad dash to gather money. I'd even sold off my still-in-repair Swan, my treasured premium alcohol, and pretty much everything else except the clothes on my back. I'd even dragged myself to the mercenary guild over and over to scrounge up support.

But it wasn't enough. This was the worst timing, since I'd only just traded up for the Swan.

"Three million short…" I sighed. To flush mercenaries and well-heeled nobles, this wasn't a small number, but it wasn't a ton either. However, to most common people, three million Ener was an unthinkable amount. Long-lived elves like me were another story, but normal humans could live their whole lives off that money. In other words, that wasn't the kind of cash I could scrape together in half a day.

"If I just had more time…"

If only I could use my Swan, I'd be able to make that much money in a month or two, easy. *I hate that stupid, inflexible pig so much… Why don't I just use this money on a laser rifle and some plasma grenades, maybe a few more weapons, and then we'll see how they like it?* Either way, I was doomed. I was going to end up being violated, my dignity stolen by felonious former space pirates. Might as well take that stupid pig to hell with me, right?

While I stumbled along the street seriously considering murder, I happened to see a restaurant. It was the one I'd gone into with that weird newbie, Hiro.

"Alcohol…"

Looking back, I hadn't had any proper food or drink this week. Whenever I felt like I was about to collapse, I'd just gulp down some ultra-cheap, disgusting nutritional paste straight from the tube, chased with plain

water. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to shower myself in strong liquor before I bit it.

I stumbled into the restaurant and splurged on a bunch of different drinks. They were all the cheap kind that burned your throat and got you drunk. Come to think of it, I never got the chance to drink the one I swindled that newbie out of; I'd had to sell it as part of this whole debacle. Maybe some of the same stuff was among the drinks I'd just bought.

I did end up sending a message to my dad. He probably wouldn't get it for another three days at best. Today, I would be arrested. Tomorrow, I would be incarcerated. He would get the message a day or two after that, but where would I be then? I couldn't imagine I'd be in a good spot, physically or mentally.

Maybe it wouldn't matter if I killed that pig today and went down in the process. If it came down to it, I'd rather die a hundred times than let those pirates touch me. I'd make that pig regret picking a fight.

While I leaned against the wall and drowned myself in nasty alcohol, I noticed someone approaching. I'd thrown on a cloak with a hood to avoid any trouble, but maybe I still stood out too much sitting here, drinking myself to death.

What a pain, I grumbled as I reached for the gun at my hip.

Then I gasped in surprise. I thought I'd be able to take them unaware, but the man reacted in a split second. Before I'd finished drawing, he'd pointed his own gun at me.

Despite my sorry state, I *was* a noble. I couldn't move like my father or brother, but I'd had a few muscular augmentations done. The augmentations and self-defense lessons from those days had saved my butt many times over by now. It was unthinkable that someone could respond so perfectly to my quick draw.

The man pointing the gun at me turned out to be a familiar face—Hiro. Behind him was that girl…I thought her name was Mimi. The pair of them seemed to be living a perfect, happy life together. Subjected to the dazzling cheerfulness radiating off them, I lowered my weapon and groused, "Heh, so what? Did you come here to laugh at me?"

I hated myself as soon as I said it. Sure, I was angry, but it wasn't their fault.

"Not at all!" Hiro said. "You helped us, so we're here to help you. Plus, Mimi's worried about you."

"Elma…" Mimi kneeled next to me and took my hand. She was warm. I could feel her pure, innocent concern for my health through her tight grip on my hand. It tortured my heart.

"Only two weeks, and you and I have traded places," I muttered bitterly. Mimi just hugged me. *Ah, she's warm… She's such a good girl. I can't believe she's genuinely worried about me.*

"How bad is it?" Hiro got straight to the point.

I didn't have to tell him anything, but Mimi's embrace had melted away all my pointless pride, so I spilled my guts.

"The damages to the police are too much. They could take all my money and everything from my ship and it still wouldn't be close to enough."

"How much?"

"I'm three million short."

"Three million…"

"I can't even work for at least two weeks, since my ship's out of commission. They wouldn't trust me if I said I could pay them back anyway, not after that huge accident. I tried going to the merc guild for help too, but…" I started telling him all kinds of things I shouldn't. But once my mouth started moving, I couldn't stop.

"What's the deadline? And what happens if you can't pay it?"

"I've got two hours left. If I can't do it, they're sending me to do hard labor on Tarmein III. There are so many former pirates there. If they sent a mercenary like me there…" In two hours, my life would be over. It really hit me then, and the tears spilled out like never before. "I was ready to die in space with my ship. But…not this!"

It would be a lie to say I wasn't scared of dying. Of course I was afraid of it. But if I went down in battle, I could accept that I was just too

weak. This kind of end, though? This was way too much to handle. Or was this my comeuppance? For betraying my family, who'd raised me so lovingly, and spitting on them as I walked out?

When he heard the sum, Hiro pulled out his terminal and gazed at it in thought. For a mercenary, three million wasn't a fortune, but it wasn't pocket change either. We'd run into each other a suspicious number of times by now, but all I'd done was show him around the colony and help Mimi a little. That wasn't enough reason for him to help me.

Or so I thought.

"Elma," Hiro said.

"…What?"

"Come and be a member of my crew."

"Huh?" I'd never expected those words. They drew a dumb gasp from me.

"I'll pay off the three million. In exchange, you can work with us. Specifically, I want you to teach Mimi the basics of being a mercenary and occasionally support me."

"H-hold on. Are you for real?" I had to doubt his sanity. It *sounded* reasonable enough, but this guy had to be seriously messed up in the head to spend 3,000,000 Ener just like that.

"Make your decision; we don't have long. Either you join my crew or you go to a prison station and the pirates get you."

I mean, giving me those two options is the same as not giving me an option. I'd have rather killed that stupid pig than become a plaything for space pirates. I had really planned to go buy up as many weapons as I could once I was done drinking here.

"Wh-why?" I asked. Educating the amateur Mimi aside, he wouldn't need my support—not with his abilities. Why would someone so skilled that he'd call the gold-rank exam *easy* need a sub-pilot? I certainly couldn't imagine it.

"Mimi's gonna be sad if I don't. Besides, I'll never sleep again if I let someone who helped me rot in jail. And most of all, I just want you. I think you could really help us out."

“M-me? Really?!” I sputtered.

“Yeah. Of course.”

He *wanted me*. That kind of directness blew all the thoughts out of my mind. My worries about money, my determination to commit murder—everything—was all but gone.

Does he mean what I think he means? I-I mean, I don’t think I’m ugly or anything, but it’s a little embarrassing to hear someone just come out and say it.

“H-huh? D-do you really see me like that?”

“Sure, I guess?” Hiro said with the most serious and sincere look on his face.

He called me a disappointing space elf and said I didn’t have much in the way of boobs, but… Okay? Is that just how he is, the kind of guy who can’t be honest about his feelings?

But these two were obviously happy together. I didn’t like the idea of getting between them.

“I-I see. But what about Mimi?”

“What’s wrong with having one more? You agree, right, Mimi?”

“I agree.”

“O-oh, okay…” I was dumbfounded. “One isn’t enough for you?”

S-so he does mean what I think he means. Whoa. Whoooa. That’s wild, right?

“So, what’s it gonna be? You on board or not?” Hiro asked.

I could feel my ears getting hot as he stared at me. Now that I had a good look at him, he wasn’t bad looking at all. He was surprisingly toned, but not too muscley. Seeing him gave me an odd feeling.

Argh, this is embarrassing. I know my ears must be bright red right now. I wish I could hide them…

I desperately suppressed the urge to cover my bright-red ears with my hands and wrung out an answer: “Y-yeah. I am.”

“Well, welcome to the crew. Make sure you do your job, all right?”

D-do your job? Does he mean, like…today? B-but I'm not ready for that yet…

"O-okay. Be gentle, though, okay?"

"Huh? No way. You're gonna work hard."

Hard?! So he's not even holding back the first time?! B-but when I'm on the ship, I'll have to obey everything he says… Urk.

"O-oh. I get it. I'll be ready, then. Sounds a lot better than being with who knows how many pirates, anyway."

Hiro made a weird face at that, but I would only learn why later that night after certain events.

I-I may have wholly misunderstood things, and it may have been nobody's fault but my own… But I'm not satisfied with that! At this point, I'm gonna make him take responsibility! Get ready, big guy!

Later in our travels, when Hiro said that he'd pass on touching any noble girls in the Arein System, I did find myself wavering. Still, I wasn't as much of a handful as Lieutenant Commander Serena… Though my brother might prove to be quite the handful himself.

But even before I told him about my circumstances, Hiro said he'd take responsibility. *So it's no problem. After all, he was happy to sleep with me even when he knew that I was misunderstanding things. This just makes us even, right?*

No worries. If it comes down to it, I'll do whatever it takes to deal with my brother.

Chapter 3:
Grakius Secundus

"MASTER HIRO, you look great!"

"Yeah, not too bad, I guess." I attached the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge to my usual mercenary jacket and hung the two swords at my hip alongside my laser gun. When Mimi and Elma saw it, they complimented me. *It's not that different from the usual, but…I guess I won't turn down a compliment.*

"At this point in time, you're still just an honorary knight," Elma explained. "Dressing the part isn't boasting about your status; it's showing others that you *have* status and communicating that you won't do anything that might endanger others."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep, it sure is."

I wasn't quite convinced, but if Elma said so, then it must have been true.

"Uh… Well, okay. For now, let's just go."

"Okay! Oh, I've already looked up the location of the mercenary guild," Mimi added.

"Great initiative, Mimi. Good girl."

"Hee hee…"

I patted Mimi's head as she cradled her tablet displaying the maps application. If this girl had a tail, she'd be wagging it like mad. *Yeah, you're cute.*

***

Mei saw us off as we exited the *Black Lotus*. We followed Mimi's guidance to the mercenary guild on Grakius Secundus.

"Sure are a lot of people here," I mused.

"Figures. All the goods consumed on urban planets have to be imported from elsewhere, so merchants are constantly going in and out. They produce some food in the underground geofronts, but mineral resources are basically all imported. You need some mineral resources to produce food, after all."

"Whoa… These urban planets must cost a hell of a lot of money to run."

"Not exactly," Elma explained. "They produce high-added-value goods using materials they've imported. Imperial-grade goods are treasured both inside and outside the empire."

"Ooh… Not that it matters much to us, though, right?"

"Not necessarily," Mimi chimed in. "The Steel Chef 5 is an imperial-grade good, after all."

"Whoa. The Steel Chef 5 *is* pretty great…" The Steel Chef 5's cooking ability was truly unfathomable. Once you experienced its ability to turn cheapo food cartridges into gourmet dishes, it became impossible to enjoy the meals made by other automatic cookers.

"The *Krishna*'s fully automatic bath system is another imperial-grade good."

"Ooh. That one's awesome, too," I agreed. On top of filling itself with water at the perfect temperature with the touch of a button, it also washed your whole body for you *and* had a massage feature. Better yet, it came with a drying option for when you got out. When I first used it, I'd felt like laundry, but once you tried it you could never go back. "Wow. Can't underestimate the imperial-grade stuff."

"Their food is great, too," Elma added. "Imperial-grade crops, livestock, and liquor sell for really high prices."

"I don't think I've ever seen their food. But I'm sure you can eat it there, so how about we go out for a bite when we land in the capital?"

“You mean it? I can’t wait!” Mimi grinned like a little girl. Elma also seemed excited; maybe she felt some nostalgia for home. *Let’s take the mechanic twins, too. They seem pretty stressed out about the imperial capital branch office stuff.*

We arrived at the Grakius Secundus mercenary guild, and boy, was it one hell of a building. As expected of a capital office, really.

“Ooh… Now this is something.” *But what’s this weird feeling I’m getting? For some reason, the entrance is a swinging wooden door. But the rest of the building is modern…or futuristic, I guess. It really clashes.*

“The Prime colony is a military base, so the only mercenary guilds in the Grakius system are this one and the training school on Prime,” Elma explained.

“Isn’t there one in the capital itself?”

“There’s no demand.”

“…I see.”

“That makes sense,” Mimi agreed.

There might be some demand for mercenaries when it came to guarding cargo here at this outer colony, but even if there *was* a mercenary guild on the planet itself, what mercenary would ever go near it? After all, docking there would take too much time and effort for anyone sane to bother with it.

We were still chatting when we stepped into the mercenary guild. *Okay, seriously, why did they put a cowbell on the swinging door? Are they just committed to the aesthetic?*

Ching-a-ling! the bell chimed as we walked in.

I surveyed the furniture and nodded to myself. “Very whimsical design here.”

“Well, they did spend a fortune on it.”

“Wow… It’s ancient Western style!”

Wooden floors, wooden tables. The left wall had wooden counter seating and a shelf full of multi-colored bottles, while the right one had a wooden counter for business purposes. It was a chaotic space, like a public

office and saloon smashed into one. The whole place was full of the smell of wood.

"This is lumber-style material," Elma told us. "It's made to emit an aroma just like real wood."

"Wouldn't real wood be cheaper?" I asked.

"Not at all. Especially not in this star system."

"Lumber is extremely expensive, Master Hiro."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I can see that."

Back when we'd stayed in a log cabin on the resort planet, Mimi—a girl born and raised on a colony—had been genuinely amazed at the natural plants and lumber of the log house, even though they were common there.

While we talked and made our way to the business counter, I felt a lot of eyes on us. *I guess we stand out a little.* One of us was a guy in merc clothing with two swords and a shiny medal on his chest. Next to him was a small yet busty girl and a willowy elf beauty. Some of the gazes felt a little aggressive, probably because I had those two with me, but they likely wouldn't try anything as long as I was flashing my swords around.

We continued undeterred and arrived at the counter. Before I could say a word, the female receptionist greeted me. She looked on edge, presumably because of my unusual combination of mercenary clothes and two swords.

"Welcome. What brings you here today?"

"Just looking for some quick advice," I replied, taking out my handheld terminal to display my ID.

She quickly compared my ID to the info on her own display—then recoiled in shock. The fact that she managed not to blurt anything out was probably a testament to her professionalism.

"Umm, er, welcome, Captain Hiro. The advice you'd like to request… Would it be related to the ceremony?"

"Yeah, that's it. So you know about it?"

"Yes, sir. The mercenary guild and Imperial Fleet have a relationship of mutual respect," the receptionist said with a serious look.

The mercenary guild was basically a subcontractor to the Imperial Fleet, so it made sense that they had a good relationship. But there wasn't necessarily a clear-cut power relationship between them in terms of which was superior or inferior.

If good relations broke down and space pirates started running amok in a star system where the mercenary guild decided not to intervene, the empire's economy would take a hit from the resulting damage to any unprotected trade routes. The imperial government would then take their anger out on the fleet, wondering what the hell they were doing. So the relationship went both ways.

"It's my first time attending one of these ceremonies, and it doesn't feel super real. On top of that, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do there. So I came to you."

"I see… During the ceremony, your attire, speech, and every individual action will be closely observed."

"Yeah, uhh… Well, I had Mei drive that etiquette stuff into me."

My swordplay was almost decent, and Mei's Spartan training regime had focused on formal dancing and manners. I didn't mind dancing with Mei, but there was way too much to learn about manners.

"Pardon?"

"We have a high-spec Maidroid who's been teaching this young man how to behave," Elma explained.

"Oh, okay. Then all that remains is the clothing…"

"Will this do?" Mimi showed an image on her tablet to the receptionist. *Ack! That picture is from when Chris picked out those noble clothes… When did they take it?*

"Ah, how dignified!" the receptionist exclaimed.

"Right?!"

"Don't agree with her…" I sighed. "So, will that work or not?"

"Hmm, good question. This ceremony will be more of a military affair, so dressing in that manner may be more appropriate."

"Huh."

The outfit Chris had picked out for me was basically fancy nobles' clothes. It would probably be fine for a party or something, but an award ceremony for a military honor most likely called for something else.

"Next—" she began.

But before she could get another word out, a middle-aged man cut in from behind her, "Sorry for barging in on your talk. Would you be Captain Hiro and his crew?"

Hmm. This guy's pretty good-looking, and he's in nice shape too. I bet those glasses are some kind of wearable info device or something.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" I looked him up and down warily, trying to imply *Who are you and what do you want?* He seemed physically fit, but it didn't look like he was personally cracking skulls or anything. His air was more like that of a shrewd desk worker.

"I'm Marcus, deputy branch manager of the mercenary guild's Grakius branch. I'm sorry to interrupt your consultation, but there's a matter we must urgently discuss. Would you mind following me to the meeting room in the back?"

"Uhh…"

This looked like it was going to be annoying. I turned to Mimi and Elma; both of them had their brows furrowed and hands to their chins in thought. Even the receptionist had a frozen smile on her face and sweat beading on her brow thanks to the sudden appearance of her deputy manager. I felt a little bad for her.

"I guess you won't take 'no thanks' for an answer?" I asked.

"While I do understand your feelings, I promise it's not all bad." Marcus grinned wryly.

"Well, if you say so…" If he had good news too, I had little choice but to go with him. Though I wasn't a big fan of the promise of bad news with it.

"Your cooperation is much appreciated. There's a staircase at the end of this hallway; follow it when you're done here. I'll be waiting." With that, Marcus trotted off.

I guess that's that. I looked at the still-frozen receptionist. "Uhh, sorry for that. And thanks."

"No, sir. It's quite all right…"

I bowed to the woman with the plastered-on smile and looked for the indicated hallway with Mimi and Elma in tow. *Now, good news and bad news. Let's see what we get.*

***

Marcus was waiting for us in front of the staircase. We followed him up the stairs and entered a door on the second floor, where a broad-chested older man awaited us. Unlike Marcus, this guy wasn't just fit; his arms were like logs. He looked like he could break a man's neck with one hand.

"I'm Johannes, the manager of the mercenary guild's Grakius branch."

"Captain Hiro. Pleasure to meet you, sir." We exchanged a handshake. *Hey, I like how this guy doesn't squeeze the hell out of your hand just because he's strong enough to do it.*

"Umm, so… I heard there was good news and bad news, sir?" I asked stiffly.

"Right. No need to be so respectful. I can't stand formal conversation."

"Thanks for that… So, can we get the bad news out of the way?"

"Sure. That's more urgent, anyway," Johannes said, shooting a glance at Elma. *Aha. So it's related to her?* "Viscount Willrose sent us an inquiry. I believe you know what he's after."

"Only that it's related to Elma. I don't have any clue what his actual demands are." I feigned ignorance and plopped down on the couch. *He's probably demanding we hand Elma over immediately.*

"Viscount Willrose would like you to deliver the girl there—his daughter—to him at once."

"Ha ha, I see. And he just assumed I'd agree to that?"

The room fell quiet. Johannes looked sullen, and Marcus massaged his temple as if to suppress a headache. I broke the silence first. “I’d consider it if that was what Elma herself wanted, but she doesn’t want it. Right?”

“Right,” Elma agreed. “Maybe I’d leave this crew if my captain wanted me out, but as long as he doesn’t, I’m staying.”

“There you have it. Besides, why would the mercenary guild accept a request like that? Aren’t you supposed to shield your guild members from nobles’ unjust requests?” Without saying it in so many words, I was trying to tell them that because Elma was a silver-rank mercenary, she should be under their protection as well. The branch manager’s expression remained impassive, but the deputy branch manager looked down and massaged his brow harder.

“As a guild, we will pass on the viscount’s demands, but we can’t and won’t force you to do anything,” Johannes said. “When we receive such a request, we are obligated to inform you of it. And while we are compelled to hand over criminals, your friend over there is not a criminal.”

“That’s right,” I agreed.

“And really, we don’t want to get wrapped up in some noble’s family drama. So if we’re going to make any demand of you, it’s that you keep us out of this.”

“Hear that, Elma?”

“W-well, all I can do is apologize, I guess.” Elma grinned helplessly. *A runaway noble daughter stealing a small craft and escaping through space… That’s just too much for me.*

“So, what exactly do you want us to do?” I asked.

“We have informed them that the mercenary guild’s position is to respect individual free will. I’ll give you the viscount’s contact information, so you should resolve this matter between yourselves. But if he or his people abuse their authority or use violence to unjustly threaten your safety, we’ll have to step in. So if that happens, report to us at once.”

“Aye-aye. Say, how about that good news?”

“Your Gold Star award is all but guaranteed, Captain Hiro. And accordingly, we’ll be raising your rank from gold to platinum.”

Yeah, that’s not very surprising. The problem is that I don’t actually care.

Noticing the blank look on my face, Elma demanded, “Why don’t you seem happy about it?” She was even thornier than usual now. *Oh, yeah. Looking back, she was seriously jealous when I got promoted to gold rank.*

“Meh. It’s just that shooting up the rankings so fast is leaving me without anything to strive for. Kind of spoils the fun.”

Johannes sighed and shook his head. “You platinum rankers really have a screw or two loose.” It seemed he knew other platinum-rank mercs too. “Whether you’re happy or about it or not, it’s a done deal. You’ll be the fourth mercenary in the empire’s long history to receive the Gold Star award, and you won’t be the second one to stay at gold rank if I can help it.”

“A political move, huh?”

“Something like that, but I don’t think you lack the skill, either. The military sent us your battle data, and I’ve seen your exploits from the Tarmein System all the way till now. It’s astounding how much you’ve done in so little time. Nobody would disagree if I said you’re on par with the other platinum-rank mercenaries.”

“…Now that you mention it, it’s true,” Elma agreed.

“That’s Master Hiro for you.” Mimi huffed in satisfaction, apparently pleased that our exploits had been recognized. *Your smug grins are too cute, Mimi.*

“By the way, uhh, when exactly is my rank going up?”

“Today,” Johannes answered. “The paperwork is in, and it’ll be made public during the Gold Star award ceremony. But your rank itself will be platinum as of today.”

“All right. Does it come with any benefits?”

“A few. First off, when you’re working with the mercenary guild, you’ll be our top priority. Consider that preferential treatment.”

“Hmm, interesting.” Frankly, I didn’t think that was much to look forward to. It might make paperwork and the like a bit faster, but it was kind of lame for a top-rank benefit.

“You’ll also get a thirty percent discount on insurance premiums, and you’ll be insured for thirty percent more. Also, when ship and weapon manufacturers come to us with requests to test their prototypes, you’ll be the first to hear of it. Since they’ll be asking for continuous data updates, you will in effect receive their goods for free.”

“Ooh, I like that sound of that.” Though I doubted they’d be able to give me a better ship than the *Krishna*, or better equipment than what was already on it. I’d have to trust that stuff with my life, so I didn’t want to use just any half-baked prototype.

The 30 percent discount and 30 percent increase in insurance were straight-up wins. Spending less money was a direct benefit; I’d be paying 30 percent less for insurance when I bought a new ship, and resupplying, maintenance, and repair expenses would also go down. “Hey, I think I heard platinum-rank mercs are supposed to get more protection from nobles or something?” I prompted him.

“We can’t make any specific promises there, but platinum rankers are the backbone of our reputation. Of course, you will have our utmost support if any nobles should pick a fight with you, though I can’t imagine any noble would be so unreasonable with a platinum ranker.”

“They are currently in the process of doing exactly that.”

“What’s befalling you now is something you brought upon yourselves. Really, it’s just a little family spat. We won’t interfere in that. But if a noble caught sight of that young woman and abused his power to try to take her from you, we would gladly stand by you.”

“So you act like you’ll help, but you actually won’t.”

“You made that mess, so you gotta clean it up, friend.” Johannes shrugged his broad shoulders.

Well, I guess I sort of get it. In the end, we’re just a thug-like merc and a runaway noble girl being harassed by her—understandably—angry parents. Though it still doesn’t sit right with me that they immediately

demanded I hand over Elma instead of trying to settle it through peaceful negotiation first.

"Fair enough. Is that all?"

"No, there's more. Your reward for destroying the Mother Crystal has been set. I hear it's 15,000,000 Ener."

"Fifteen million!" Mimi reeled back.

"That's a pretty large number," said Elma.

"Yeah, not bad."

Seeing Elma's and my reactions, Johannes chuckled. "You two seem like you've forgotten the value of an Ener."

I do think it's a good chunk of change, but as these things go, it's not even enough for another Black Lotus.

"Give one percent to Mimi and three percent to Elma for me. That's 150,000 Ener and 450,000 Ener, so my cut is 14,400,000 Ener."

"A hundred fifty thousand…" Mimi was gobsmacked in the face of so much money.

"Much appreciated."

Mimi, it's really about time you adjusted to a mercenary's sense of value. Or maybe she's just confused because she doesn't know what to spend all that money on. She loves trying new foods, but you can't exactly spend that much more on food even if you really splurge. She's not the kind to go wild shopping for clothes, either.

"So is that all?" I asked. "If so, we'd better get going; we need to get ready for the ceremony."

"Understood. The emperor might be present at the ceremony, so be on your best behavior."

"Pray I don't have to meet him directly."

"I'll do that. Oh, by the way!" Johannes called out as we left. We turned on our way out the door. "Young lady, have we met before?"

Johannes's eyes were locked onto Mimi. She cocked her head curiously, thought for a moment, and then shook her head. "I don't think so.

This is my first time in the capital, and I never knew any mercenaries until I met Master Hiro. Boarding his ship was the first time I ever left my colony, Tarmein Prime."

"…Huh. Guess it's my mistake." Johannes cocked his head, just like Mimi.

Mimi was such a cutie, I figured you'd never forget her if you saw her once. Maybe she looked like some celebrity out here or something? Back on Earth, they used to say everyone had three doppelgangers out there, so maybe you're even more likely to find someone who looks like you out here in space.

"If you're done hitting on her, can we leave? And if you are, some advice: you're too old, my man."

"I'm not making a pass at a girl as young as my grandkids. Get outta here."

With his cheek twitching, Johannes shooed us out. I shrugged, and we finally left the mercenary guild's meeting room.

Chapter 4:
The People of the Willrose Family

WE RETURNED TO THE RECEPTIONIST up front. She gave us a little more advice regarding the ceremony and directed us to a store that carried the types of clothes and accessories we'd need. While we were there, we also updated my guild rank, bringing me from gold to platinum proper. I wasn't the youngest platinum ranker in history, but I was apparently the one to rise the fastest from registration to platinum. With that, we finally exited the guild.

The world's fastest platinum ranker. I didn't mind that title one bit. It was a shame that I'd gotten to the top rank so fast, but the title itself was neat. I was still pondering it when we arrived at the clothing store.

"Hmm, how about this one?"

"Wow! Such pretty fabric!"

Women sure take a lifetime to shop. Especially when it comes to really going all out. I mean, I get it. I really do. I also get why they'd want a man's opinion. But it's up to you what you want to wear, right? Can I leave now? Please? Aww, okay. Fine. But I don't know what makes a dress design good or bad! Seriously! All I can do is offer sixth-grader remarks like "cute" or "pretty"!

If I did have any conditions, one would be that Mimi—who, unlike Elma, didn't have status—shouldn't wear anything too flashy. I didn't want any weird nobles to get ideas. That would make me feel better. Also…I didn't want other men staring at their boobs, so I would prefer if they didn't show too much cleavage. It might have been impossible for Mimi to hide her assets, but I wanted her to at least cover up a little. Those belonged to me, after all.

"Hee hee…" Mimi flushed pink when I shared my selfish, possessive opinions. She was so cute, I felt like I'd have a nosebleed if I looked at her much longer. Every time Mimi wriggled from embarrassment and her generous breasts bounced, Elma looked at her and then down to her own

chest. *It's not like you have nothing going on. Yours belong to me, too, so don't try to show them off too much.*

"Whatever." Her ears twitched and flushed red when I voiced that thought. She was just as easily embarrassed as Mimi.

Anyway, contrary to expectations, the dresses in this futuristic universe weren't as out there as you might think. Here I'd been worried that in the great capital we would be surrounded by models in weirdo outfits that you might expect to see at a fashion show in a certain lovely city that's home to the Arc de Triomphe… I was honestly scared there might be some crazy trends like that.

The materials definitely weren't normal fabric; they had a lot of futuristic aspects. But in terms of design, they were basically just normal dresses. Maybe these imperial nobles were more conservative than I'd thought when it came to fashion. These people had developed techniques to fight laser guns off with swords, turning what used to be merely decorative into practical weapons. Maybe it should have been obvious that they had conservative ideals? Or maybe someone had that crazy idea once, and then it got popular and just kind of became a normal part of the culture.

After trying on a bunch of different styles, Mimi settled on a classy yet modest white dress, while Elma ordered a stylish pale-green one. A scanner took their measurements precisely, so all that needed to be done was to combine that data with the design template. The dresses would be finished within a few hours and sent to our ship.

"It's crazy how made-to-order dresses only take a few hours to make," I mused.

"The price was even crazier…" Mimi shuddered.

"Don't worry about it. Seeing you two looking so cute and pretty is worth the money."

"Yeah, right. After you acted like you were about to fall asleep from boredom the whole time?" Elma countered, though she clearly wasn't too bothered.

In truth, the dresses had only cost 10,000 to 20,000 Ener apiece. That was basically nothing to me. Those outfits didn't even add up to the cost of a single anti-ship reactive torpedo.

Once the dresses were taken care of, it was my turn. But mine was much quicker; I told the employee about the ceremony and asked them to pick out something to suit the occasion. That was it. What I ended up with was a lot like an old-fashioned military uniform, but it was surprisingly easy to move around in. Nobles wore styles like this too, so it was apparently designed to give them the freedom of motion necessary to wield their swords.

"Next would be…accessories?"

As we left the dress shop, I got an uncanny feeling—suddenly, something flew at me, backed by malice.

"Ngk?!"

I caught sight of what looked like a mass of white cloth out of the corner of my eye. Before I could get a good look, I'd jumped in front of Mimi and Elma, my hand on the hilt of my sword. This wasn't the place to fire a laser gun; there were too many people around.

"Oh ho. You're no ordinary man, with those swords on your hip."

Our assailant was a man with feminine features on his elegant face, long and pointed ears, and a trim, neat figure. The man's outfit was classy and mostly white, and he had a long, slender sword at his hip. The white handbag at my feet—the object that had been flung at me—was his.

"My name is Ernst Willrose. I challenge you to a duel!"

"Uh…not really interested. Sorry," I replied bluntly.

He stared blankly for a moment before finally grimacing like an angry god. "What?! Why?!"

"Because I have no reason to fight you…Brother-in-Law." I took my hand off my sword and smiled.

The elf man—Ernst—brandished his own sword and roared at me, "How dare you call me that?! I'll cut you down where you stand!" At this, the bystanders around us started to scream and run away.

"Hey now, I haven't picked up the bag. If I don't pick up the bag, there's no duel."

"Then it'll be a one-sided slaughter—"

I pointed at the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge on my chest and said, “If you attack me now, I think you’d be in real trouble.”

“Rgh…!” Ernst’s pretty face warped again, and he shut his mouth with a snap. Under the watchful eyes of a crowd, an enraged noble cuts down a mercenary who seemed to be minding his own business. *Normally*, that wouldn’t be much of an issue; the noble could flex his influence to shake off any real trouble. But I had two swords at my hip *and* the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge on my chest. In other words, anyone could tell at a glance that I was equal to nobility. A blue-blooded noble like him couldn’t feign ignorance either; he knew what the badge meant. A one-sided attack on me now would go down very badly for him.

“Dear brother,” Elma spoke up.

“E-Elma! You don’t need to stay with that man! Come home with me __”

“I don’t like it when you’re violent. Leave us alone, please.” Elma’s eyes, like her words, were as cold as ice.

Ernst looked thunderstruck. He dropped his sword and fainted—still standing up.

Wait. He fainted? Are you serious? Oh jeez, he’s foaming at the mouth. What did Elma do?! Did she kill him with her eyes? Scary!

“Let’s just leave him and go,” Elma said frostily.

“Huh?!”

“It’s fine. C’mon.” Elma pulled Mimi and me along and began walking, leaving her brother in the street.

“O-okay…?”

Too confused by the bizarre situation to muster any comment, we silently allowed her to drag us over to the jewelry store.

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Despite the unexpected incident with Elma’s brother, we eventually arrived at the jewelry store, finished our shopping, and returned to the *Black*

Lotus.

"Are you sure it was safe to just leave him like that?"

"It's fine. I mean, who cares? He obviously thinks you're using my debt to you to take advantage of me anyway."

"Well, he's not entirely wrong…"

If nothing else, Elma had offered herself to me because of the 3,000,000 Ener debt. But I think—and maybe this is crazy—that things are different now. We basically treat the debt like it doesn't exist… Though it is a liiittle odd that she hasn't paid back even one Ener yet, now that I think about it.

Yet Elma almost never spent money, save for when she splurged on alcohol back in the Arein System. There was probably a reason she hadn't paid me back. For example…maybe she was using the debt as an excuse to stay with me longer? At least, that was what I assumed; I'd never actually asked.

"Sure, maybe that's how things started off," Elma went on. "But these days, I'm here because I want to be. And I plan to pay off all the debt at once someday… But I only have 1.3 million right now, so I'm not even halfway there." Elma sighed as she thought of her savings so far.

"Umm, now that you mention it, I have 380,000 Ener. And I haven't even been on board a year yet…" Mimi shuddered in awe at her own wealth.

Mimi didn't owe me any money, though. Her savings were entirely hers. I might've spent 500,000 Ener to get her off that colony, but I wasn't planning to make her pay it back. That would just be moving her debt from the colony to me, after all. Really, I wasn't about to start being crappy over any of the money I'd willingly spent…though maybe they'd have preferred to pay me back for their own peace of mind.

"Uhh… Oh, yeah. We're back at the ship, so I guess we'd better call your family, right?"

"I guess… Ugh, what a pain."

"Ah ha ha…" Mimi laughed. "But maybe it's not so bad? It is nice to have family that worries about you. Isn't it, Master Hiro?"

“Yeah, it sure is.”

Mimi and I were alone in this universe. She had lost her parents in an accident, and given how she’d been left to suffer after they passed, I figured she didn’t have any ties to her grandparents or other blood relatives. As for me, I probably don’t need to remind you by now, but I’d woken up drifting in space in the *Krishna*. I didn’t have anyone in this universe I could call family, though I considered my crew to be found family.

Elma seemed to consider our situation, and her fed-up look turned into a serious, sympathetic one. “Okay. I’ll call them now.”

“If it’s okay, I’d like to sit in,” I said. “We’re a crew, so we’re kind of like family, right?”

“I-I want to join, too!” Mimi chimed in. “Oh, and I’ll call Mei, Tina, and Wiska!”

“All right. Could you?” Elma smiled and watched as Mimi used her tablet to summon all the other members of our crew.

***

Mei had stayed with the ship, so she made it to the lounge in no time. Meanwhile, Tina and Wiska were out dealing with the Space Dwergr office, so they said it’d be hard for them to join us. Apparently, the branch office was actually *on* Grakius Prime, since it had a large ship bay.

Elma had called the Willrose estate in advance and arranged a meeting time. Actually, when she’d first called, they said they were willing to talk immediately if possible. It seemed they wanted to ensure her safety ASAP.

“Okay, I’m dialing in now.”

They picked up almost immediately, and three people appeared on the lounge’s large holo-display within seconds. One was a young man—though he looked older than Ernst, the guy who had threatened me in public earlier—while the other two were a pair of young women who looked like sisters. All of them had pointed ears like Elma’s and an aura much like hers as well.

“Father, Mother, Sister. It’s good to see you.”

“Elma… We’re so happy to see you safe.” The father with eyes so similar to Elma’s gazed at her and breathed a sigh of relief.

The women’s eyes, meanwhile, were fixed on me. “When we heard you were with a mercenary, we wondered what kind of a big, coarse man he might be,” one said.

“But he’s surprisingly…small? Or normal, rather?” the other added.

Which one is her mom and which is her sister? They both looked so young I couldn’t help but wonder. I really would have thought they were both her sisters. And supposedly, one was her *older* sister.

“Allow me to introduce you,” Elma said. “This is the captain of the ship I’m on. He’s a platinum-rank mercenary and bearer of the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, Hiro.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Hiro. Due to my humble birth, my words and actions may displease some of more refined backgrounds, so I thank you in advance for your patience with me.” I put a hand to my chest and bowed slightly. The three people watching blinked in amazement through the holo-display.

“Hiro, you’re confusing my family!”

“Hm? Did I say something wrong?”

“They might expect imperial court language from other nobles, but they don’t expect it from mercs.”

“I see. Hear that, Mimi?”

“Bweh?! Ah… Umm, hi, I’m Mimi. Master Hiro and Elma saved my life on Tarmein Prime, and I’ve been a member of this crew ever since. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Mimi introduced herself and bowed as well.

The Willrose family all turned to her; Elma’s father and one of the women went wide-eyed for some reason and did a double take at Mimi. The other woman cocked her head, apparently seeing something intriguing in her as well.

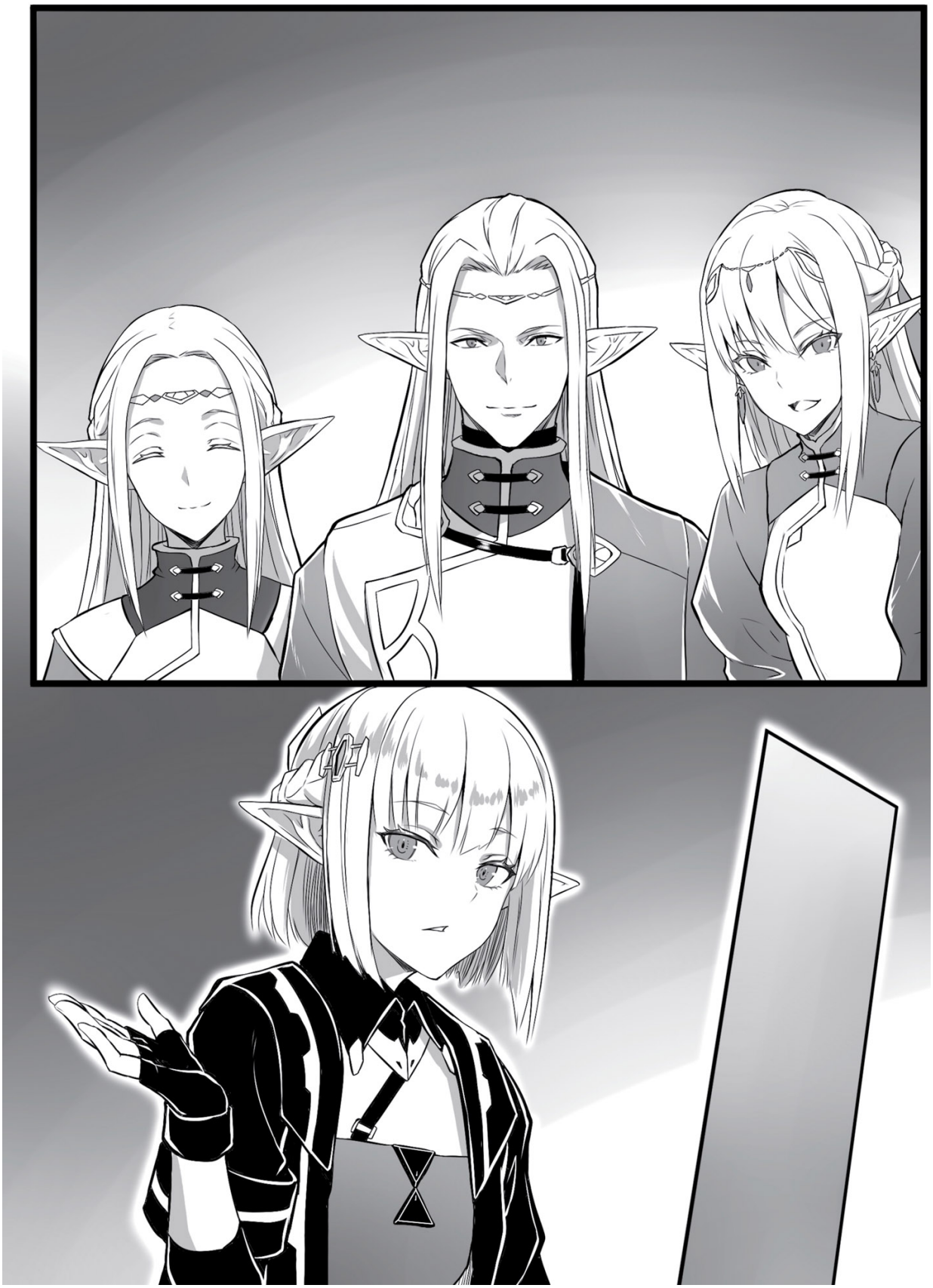
“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“N-no, there isn’t… Ahem. Pardon me. My name is Eldomois Willrose. This is my wife, Milfa, and this is Elma’s older sister, Elfin.”

“Thank you for taking care of our daughter.”

“Nice to meetcha.”

So the elf with the hip-length silver hair was mother Milfa, while the blonde one with her hair tied up in three braids was sister Elfin. *Hmm. All of them look so young, even her dad.*



Eldomois said, “Our urgency in contacting you today is in regards to Ernst. Oh, as you may know, he is my son—”

“We’ve already run into him,” Elma interrupted him. “He challenged Hiro to a duel, but I dealt with him.”

Eldomois paused. “Then I’m glad everyone came out of that safely,” he said, closing his eyes and sighing. “The moment he learned you had arrived in the capital, he ran out of the mansion and sped to Secundus. Of course, I was also aware of your Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, Sir Hiro, so as you can imagine, I was beside myself with worry.”

“Figures,” Elma answered. “But what was the deal with that demand you made to the mercenary guild? They made it sound like you were trying to use the family name to pressure them into handing me over immediately.”

“What? I only asked that they have you contact me promptly…”

“I bet that dumbass sent another message that caused the confusion,” Elfin said caustically. Presumably, “that dumbass” was Ernst.

“Maybe so… We’ll have to have a word with the mercenary guild later. More importantly—Elma, it’s been five years. Your betrothal to Alexander has expired, and we don’t intend to force you to marry anyone. Come home, please.” Eldomois looked sincere as he tried to persuade Elma.

Alexander? Betrothal? Ha ha!

“I see. So that’s why you ran away, huh?” I guessed.

“That’s not *exactly* the whole story, but it was a big part of it, yeah. I can fill you in later… But Father, I’m still not coming home.”

“Because you still owe this man a debt? Three million, as I recall. We will gladly settle it from the family’s funds. I’m willing to go even double or triple that number, in fact. Whatever it takes to have you back. A mercenary life isn’t safe; you’re in constant danger out there. If you come home, you’ll never have to do such risky work again.”

“I do still owe Hiro the money. Heck, I haven’t paid him back a single Ener, so it’s still the full three mil. But I’m not letting you pay my debts. I need to settle them with my own work.”

“Your sense of duty is admirable, but you are a member of the Willrose family. Moreover, you’re an unwed young woman. Don’t you understand what it means for you to be on a *man’s* ship—”

“Of course I do. And, frankly, that ship has sailed.” Elma hugged me from the side.

“Wha—?!” Eldomois’s eyes widened in astonishment. But he quickly gathered himself and glared daggers at me. “A damned mercenary has besmirched my precious daughter…?”

“Yep, sure did,” I declared, facing him head-on. “And I’m not about to let Elma go, either.”

“Very well, blackguard. I challenge—worgh?!” On the other side of the holo-display, fists jabbed into either side of him, and he writhed in agony. Both Elma’s mother and sister had punched him from where they sat.

“Men,” Elma’s mother sighed. “Always trying to duel each other to the death… Give me a break.”

“We already have one meat-for-brains sword supremacist in my idiot little brother, Father.”

“Besides, Hiro’s a hero with the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, and he’s going to receive a Silver or even Gold Star soon. People with Gold Stars hold a status equal to viscounts, and he’s already a knight thanks to his service award. You can’t just challenge him to a duel willy-nilly.”

As Eldomois wrapped his arms around his stomach and curled up in pain, the women beside him piled insult onto his injury. *Hey, girls? Would you mind stopping? I’m kind of starting to feel bad for this guy.*

“Either way, uh, I kinda can’t leave Hiro anymore…”

“Oh? Oooh, what’s that?” Elma’s mother said.

“Is my little sister already a step ahead of me?!”

Milfa and Elfin suddenly grinned. *What? What did Elma mean there?*

“Elma, why are they acting like that?”

“U-umm… Hey, remember what happened at that trading colony back in the Arein System?”

“Oh? Uh… Yeah, yeah, okay. I get it.”

Back when we’d gotten our medical exams in the Arein System, something had made her blush really hard. Apparently, when elves found a partner they were emotionally compatible with, it became easier for them to get pregnant…or something.

“N-next time we meet in person, I’ll tell you about it.”

“You can say it right now!”

“Your sister’s right. We’ll gladly listen now.”

“*Next* time we talk!”

The blushing Elma and her family started chatting up a storm through the holo-display. It took some time for Eldomois to recover from the two-pronged attack. To be precise, it took about five minutes.

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We eventually wrapped up the conversation with the promise that we would meet and talk more directly after the ceremony. Though Eldomois seemed like he still had a few things he wanted to say about my relationship with Elma…

“This may be a little post-hoc justification,” said Milfa, “but Hiro *does* have a Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge, and he may soon find himself decorated with a Gold Star as well. The fact that we sent Elma to you, before any others could, should be good for our image as nobles of the imperial court.”

“Graaaagh?! Milfa, stop! Stop, I say!”

It was incredible how Milfa could maintain an even smile while she held Eldomois—whose hatred for me was still evident—in an arm lock. *Yeah, no doubt about it. She’s Elma’s mother.*

“Kinda crazy how they seem to have forgiven us, though. I half get it and half don’t, really.”

“Oh, you mean what Mom said? Basically, if anyone accuses my parents of not being able to control their daughter, they can now counter by

claiming they sent me out to find a capable mercenary. It's pure luck on my part, but you *do* hold two very prestigious awards."

"Do all nobles squabble like children?"

"Kinda. That's how they communicate: by constantly one-upping each other," Elma said with a shrug. She was still slick with sweat. We'd come to her room together, so I was also sweaty. "But anyway, you're a distinguished mercenary now. Since you've already got a laundry list of accomplishments, they'll just spin whatever story is consistent with your public profile. Actually, the best move in this situation might be for them to stay quiet and let the others read between the lines."

"That's a world beyond my understanding. Sounds like a pain, though."

"Sure does. Part of why I left home was because I was so bored and fed up with that stuff."

"Good decision. I think a life where you can go where you want when you want, see different things, eat different foods, and kill pirates once in a while is a lot more fun."

"Totally," Elma giggled. She sat on the bed and flopped down next to me. She then leaned against my side. "Besides, this ship has you, Mimi, Mei, Tina, and Wiska. I get to adventure through space with like-minded friends. Sometimes we get sucked into trouble or worse, but we overcome it together and celebrate together. I'm satisfied with my life; it's like a holo-novel. I'm not about to let it go. So I don't mind playing along with my mom a little if it means living the way I want."

"You're right. So, you've decided that you're in it for the long haul?"

"Yep. Tina and Wiska might be away, but I'll get together with Mimi and Mei tomorrow to talk about it. We have to protect the life we've built here."

"Yeah."

I listened to Elma talk about her family as if she were telling me a bedtime story until we fell asleep together.

Chapter 5:
Imperial Bloodline

THE NEXT DAY, during breakfast, we decided to share the resolution we'd come to with Mimi and Mei.

"I'm okay with that, but are you sure, Master Hiro?" Mimi cocked her head.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Umm, depending on the circumstances, I think they may formally appoint you an imperial knight and turn you into a noble for real."

"Wow. A formal noble title, huh? In other words…instead of having a title limited to myself, I'd be able to pass it down to my kids?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to be a noble, Mimi?"

"Huh?" She cocked her head again at my question. *C'mon, pick up what I'm putting down here.*

"I mean, if I become a noble, that means you'll also be one. Or is it more like Elma's my legal wife while Mimi's my concubine?"

"That might make sense on some level considering my lineage," Elma replied, "but I'm an elf. It's hard for elves and humans to have kids, so I think it's fine if you choose a fellow human to be your legal wife. As for my personal feelings… I'm fine with it, really. She's a better fit for a legal wife, anyway."

Mimi finally figured out what I was implying after hearing Elma's assessment. Her face went beet red.

"Well," I said, "I guess becoming a noble and gaining landowner's rights would help me buy a home on some planet. That's an option, but it would make it harder for me to continue my mercenary life…"

"True… Oh, but listen. Instead of staying in the capital with my dad, what if you paid Chris a visit? That might work out. Count Dalenwald kinda

owes you. I dunno if you'd be able to become a knight or baron, but if he takes you under his wing, I bet he'd let you keep some amount of freedom."

"Seems like I'd have to take Chris if I went with that, right?"

"What's the problem? You like her, don't you?"

"Well, I guess I do, but…"

I mean, how could anyone be on the receiving end of such a cute girl's affection and not like her? Although I don't like the idea of crawling back to a girl I turned down… And I bet if I became a noble, she'd be more aggressive than ever.

I'd rejected her before for a variety of reasons. But if I became a noble, the situation would change. *Well, one of those reasons was that touching her was totally out of the question. I wasn't going to do it no matter what.* If I touched a girl like her, I'd go straight to jail. The police would have me in no time.

"Well, being a noble might be fun, but I think I want to keep living my free mercenary life for now. Like, imagine if we went through all this and then Mimi didn't even want to marry me. That'd be the worst. Like, why not go dig a hole and bury myself in it at that point?"

Mimi blushed, shut her eyes, and cried, "I-it's okay! I do want to!"

"Woohoo!" I pumped a fist and looked at Elma.

"Yeah, yeah. Good for you. I'll marry you, too," she giggled.

Mei watched all of us in silence.

"Wanna get married, Mei?"

"I will consider the matter sincerely."

"Hear that, Elma? Mei's gonna marry me, too."

"Yeah, yeah. Might as well take Chris, Tina, and Wiska at this point. Wanna add Lieutenant Commander Serena, too?"

"I'll pass on that one." Whether I was a noble or not, a relationship with her smelled like a reactive missile to me. "Forget Serena. Would I even be able to marry Mei?"

“Yes. Machine intelligence is recognized as having human rights, after all. If you so desire, I am even able to bear your child.”

“…Seriously?”

“Seriously. However, it is a complicated process, and there are quite a few fees involved.”

“Technology is amazing…”

How the hell do you have a child with a machine? Is it like incubating a clone or something? How does that work genetically? I’m really curious on an intellectual level… Putting that aside, I declared, “Well, we’ve gone way off topic, but that’s basically it. No matter what, we’re going to maintain our freedom. We’re willing to make some concessions to grease the wheels, but if they try to interfere with our mercenary lifestyle, we will resist. Got it?”

“Okay!”

“Got it.”

“Understood, Master.”

Good. Seems like we’re all on the same wavelength here.

“So, speaking of Tina and Wiska… They went to that office yesterday; are they still not back?”

“Correct,” Mei replied. “They have their hands full with Space Dwergr work, so they informed me yesterday evening that they would stay the night to finish.”

“Whoa, now that’s what I call a sweatshop…” Dwarves were apparently tougher than humans, but how messed up was it for a company to make you stay overnight to get your work done? What the heck were their HR policies?

Just then, the buzzer sounded in the cafeteria. *Er, that’s the buzzer that says we have a visitor. Why…?*

“Are we expecting visitors?” I asked.

“No, I don’t believe so.” Mei looked around seemingly at random. She must have been accessing the *Black Lotus*’s systems to see who this visitor was. “It seems Tina and Wiska have returned.”

Hm? Why are they ringing the buzzer? They have access rights, so they shouldn't need to do that.

"It seems a few people are accompanying them, as well."

"Accompanying them?"

"Yes. There is a dwarf woman with them, along with several humans."

"Er…? What do you think's going on?"

"I wonder…" Mimi replied.

"If they came with Tina and Wiska, it must be related to their work," Elma said. "Think it might be that mercenary documentary they mentioned?"

"Oh…that. Come to think of it, they do have priority media rights or something…"

"Yes, as a part of the discount deal," Mei confirmed. "However, they should only be allowed to record if we have agreed to conditions beforehand."

Maybe they're here to greet us and check things out, then? It would've been more polite to contact us ahead of time… Hmm.

"Well, let's see what's up. If they seem fishy, we can just turn them away."

"Yup."

"Aww… You're not going to let them record us?" Mimi was still excited about the documentary.

"If we can reach an agreement, I'll think about it. Anyway, let's just see what's up first." I looked pointedly at Mei, who nodded and activated the holo-display. Two twins with dead-looking eyes appeared on it. "Welcome back, late-night workers. Who are your friends there behind you?"

"They're from the entertainment department… Sorry, hon. Mind hearin' them out for a bit?" Tina said with a big sigh. The light in her eyes was totally gone. *Oh… I see. So every universe has mass media types like this. I'd better be careful working with these people.*

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An hour after Tina and Wiska's return…

"Please forgive us for intruding on you today." The branch chief of the entertainment department of Space Dwergr's Grakius Secundus branch (holy crap, that's a long name!), chief of sales, and deputy chief all lined up in front of me and bowed on their hands and knees. Behind them, the entertainment department employees who'd followed Tina and Wiska back to the ship lay in a disorganized heap on the ground. Their faces were beyond pale—I'd say they were downright ghastly—after their sharp scolding.

Let me fill you in on how we got here. They didn't listen, they tried to get on the ship with Tina and Wiska despite every refusal, and *then* they started photographing things without permission. When we pointed out that they were supposed to request our permission for these things in advance, they handed me a script and started recording, walking all over the place, intruding in private spaces, going into the hangar, snapping pics of the *Krishna*, and even rifling through containers in our cargo… Look, I got a little pissed.

I checked with Elma, Mei, and even the mercenary guild regarding what kind of action I could take with regard to people who break into mercenary ships without permission. I also sent a video of them doing just that despite our refusal, courtesy of Mei's cameras. I asked the guild to contact Space Dwergr's Grakius Secundus office to lodge a formal complaint, and while they took care of that, I restrained the intruders.

When they complained that I was infringing on their right to free press, I flashed my Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge and explained that custom dictated I be treated as a knight. I also added that the law made an allowance for use of violence to remove intruders on mercenary ships, which meant that I wouldn't be convicted if I ended up killing them.

We mercenaries were a special case in this regard, since we often came in contact with military secrets and guarded VIPs. Of course, there

were restrictions in place to keep mercenaries from using “guarding their ship” as an excuse to commit crimes, but those didn’t apply here.

As for the pile of people on the floor, I did explain to them that I’d lodged a complaint with their office through the mercenary guild. That made them finally realize how badly they’d messed up and start begging for forgiveness. Naturally, I ignored them. That brings us to now.

“So what’s the deal with you guys pissing me off all the time? Is this your corporate culture, or what? Huh?!”

“We offer our deepest apologies.”

“Did you think you could get away with this because you sold me the ship? And what happened to making an appointment for a meeting ahead of time? Where’re your manners, huh? It’s a little crazy to just start recording and causing trouble out of nowhere, right?”

“We are sincerely sorry…”

Even I felt a little bad to see such an old dwarf hunched over on the floor like that—but that didn't mean I was going to back off on this. *What a pain.*

"Our very capable maid has been using the ship's facilities to record this whole debacle, by the way," I added. "If you don't make this right, I'll send this to all of your rival companies today." The chief of sales, entertainment department branch chief, and deputy chief all gasped and went wide-eyed at once. "I looked into it, and you sure do have *a lot* of competitors. Mobius Strip, Fomalhaut Entertainment, and Nyatflix might be a good place to start…"

Mobius Strip was the kind of company to show serious, realistic documentaries, while Fomalhaut Entertainment went in for the flashier and more dynamic ones. Nyatflix…was probably more involved in dramatized and procedural kinds of documentaries? By the way, Nyatflix's mascot was some kind of alien creature with a conical head that had no face. What was the deal with that? Looking at it head-on felt like I was getting sanity-checked. *Seriously, is that safe?*

"A-anything but that, please!" the entertainment department branch chief begged, forehead pressed against the floor.

"Just between us, and you might already know this, but I'm here in the capital for an award ceremony. I think the news of it will be publicized preeetty widely…" I looked down at the three dwarves, who occasionally glanced up at me nervously. "After that, I'm sure I'll get plenty more requests for media rights. Your company might have first rights, but that doesn't mean I'll lie down and take it if this how it's going to be. You're breaking our mutual trust, and before long, I'm gonna feel like I don't *need* to keep promises."

"W-well…"

"I only agreed to this because of the discount they gave us on this ship, but really, at this rate… How about I pay back the one and a half million as a settlement, and we call it off?"

"O-one and a half—" Hearing that, the pile on the ground let out disturbing screams and grimaced in terror.

That's right. You guys are gonna waste the priority media rights that your Vlad System manufacturers spent 1,500,000 Ener on.

"Anyway, that's enough complaints," I said. I squatted down to eye level with the three dwarves. "Let's move on to a more constructive discussion."

Ha ha ha! What's got you so scared? I'm not gonna ask for anything too ridiculous, I promise.

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I handed the scraggly heap of thwarted intruders over to the three dwarven chiefs and chased them all out of the ship. By this point, my mechanics looked like withered leaves.

"We're real sorry…"

"Sorry…"

"Nah, you two didn't do anything wrong. Don't worry about it. Besides, I know those idiots didn't listen to a word you said, right? I'm sure you tried."

"Urk… You're too kind, hon."

"Thank you…"

It was clear from their expressions at the time they rang the buzzer that they had tried to avoid bringing those vultures.

"Was it okay to leave things like that, though?" Elma asked, rummaging through the expensive-looking apology gift baskets full of snacks and high-end alcohol.

I shrugged. "It's cool. I wouldn't wanna push it too far and make even more trouble for ourselves." My demand had been that Space Dwergr, with their priority media rights, manage the media activities of other companies. I wouldn't want anyone else barging in like they had, after all. They probably had some hellish organizational work awaiting them. I didn't care if they made money or went into debt with other entertainment organizations in the process. As long as the media coverage was planned in

advance, I was even willing to work with them. But I wasn't about to have the media blowing down my doors here. Leave the mochi making to the mochi makers, and leave the media management to the media moguls.

But I also let them know that if they pushed my crew around, I was ready to use the law and my swords against them. Tina and Wiska were included in that, as well. They might've just been temporary crew on loan from their company, but to me, they were friends.

"You two be careful from now on. This isn't me scolding you; I'm legitimately worried. When attention gathers on me, it'll naturally extend to my crew too. Especially since this ship is a hundred percent mine, I'm the captain, *and* I'm the only man on board. You know how they'll see that, right?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, sir."

They answered earnestly.

"What's true or not doesn't matter in cases like this. People will think what they think either way. If word of our situation gets spread around, people might make rude remarks. If that happens, don't worry; come and talk to one of us. If you can't talk to me about something, feel free to discuss it with Mimi, Elma, or Mei."

"Yeah, no prob."

"Understood. Thank you."

"Good." I nodded and turned around to look at the other girls. I wasn't just asking Mimi, Elma, and Mei to hear the twins out; I was also letting them know that the same applied to them.

"I'd be happy to."

"Why bother asking now?"

"Please leave it to me."

"Good!" I repeated.

They had clearly taken my meaning. *I'll probably end up slandered too. But it's easy for me to just assume they're jealous and laugh it off.* And

if I was still feeling down, I could just get Mimi, Elma, and Mei to cheer me up.

"Now, how should I spend the rest of my—"

Before I could finish musing about what to do that day, my handheld terminal started ringing. *Hm? What's going on? That number doesn't look familiar. It says it's coming from the capital, but… Eh, guess I'll just answer and find out.*

I tapped the screen and threw up the caller on the lounge's holo-display. What I saw shocked me. The girl onscreen looked a little more mature than I remembered. Her glossy black hair, previously cut in a bob, had grown longer, yet her irises, burning with willpower like onyx gems, were the same. *Has she gotten taller, too?*

"Hiro, it's been a while."

"Chris?!"

"Chris!"

The noble girl, Christina Dalenwald, who I'd once spent a short vacation with on a beach resort planet, smiled back at me through the holo-display.

"Hey there," I replied.

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"Wow, long time no see. Are you here in the capital on business?"

"Yes, my grandfather and I have a few errands to run here. I'm overjoyed to see your face again, Hiro."

"Glad to see you too, Chris. We came here alongside the Imperial Fleet, so we had to pass right through the Dexar System. You look like you've grown up a bit."

"Do I? I appreciate you saying so." She flashed a refined smile. *Yeah, she definitely seems more mature than I remember. Back in Japan, there was this saying, "Take your eyes off a young man for three days, and see*

how he changes." Maybe girls these days are even more extreme. "Hello to you too, Mimi and Elma. I'm ever so happy to see you both again."

"Me too!"

"It's good to see you're doing well."

"And who are your two friends here?" Chris's eyes came to rest on Tina and Wiska. Come to think of it, they had never met.

"The redheaded one here is Tina, and her little sister is Wiska. They're on loan from a ship manufacturer called Space Dwergr, and they're fantastic engineers. Tina and Wiska, this is Christina Dalenwald. She's the daughter of Count Dalenwald. We spent some time with her right before we met you two. Oh, and we call her Chris."

"Hello. I am Christina Dalenwald. Please do call me Chris." Chris bowed slightly on the other side of the holo-display.

"Hey, I'm Tina… I-I mean, my name is Tina." Tina began fidgeting nervously when faced with a real noble young lady.

"Sis, please… My name is Wiska, Miss Chris. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Wiska was pretty smooth at times like this.

Really, I'm not surprised at all about Tina.

After we'd finished the introductions, Chris gazed at Mimi.

"Why, you really do resemble her. I'd almost say you're like twins," she said cryptically and nodded to herself.

Huh? What's going on here? There sure have been a lot of people staring at Mimi and acting surprised in this star system.

"Who does she resemble, exactly?" I asked.

"Hmm, well… Do you all know of Princess Luciada? Or perhaps… not?"

"Never heard of her."

"I only know her name," Mimi added. "She's one of the crown prince's daughters, right?"

"Yep. Oh, but it's almost time for her coming-of-age ceremony, isn't it?" Elma said. "Uh, wait a sec…" She whipped out her handheld terminal

and started typing something ridiculously fast. “You’re kidding me.” Elma stared at the screen, mouth hanging wide open in shock. It was rare for her to show surprise so openly.

“Uncanny, isn’t it?” Chris mused. “Erm…I was thinking it might cause a stir if Mimi went to the ceremony without knowing ahead of time… so I used my grandfather’s connections to contact you.”

We all gazed at Elma’s terminal screen, which displayed a girl—Mimi. Her hairstyle, accessories, and clothes were all different, but that face was *clearly* Mimi’s. *Or wait, I think Mimi’s boobs are bigger.*

“Umm…?” Mimi was obviously confused. How could she not be? I certainly was.

Well, here it is. Why oh why would they mob us like this when we thought we’d shaken off media interest in Elma? Why could that be. Bizarre.

“I guess…a random resemblance wouldn’t really explain this, right?”

“That’s right,” Chris answered.

“Nope,” Elma added.

“No way,” Tina agreed.

“Absolutely not,” Wiska drove the point home further.

“Would it not…?” Mimi was clearly at her limit with all the chaos… much like I was.

“What if we skipped out on the ceremony and made a run for it?” I suggested. “I’m getting a tummy ache here.”

“We can’t, Hiro. Serena would hunt us to the ends of the galaxy if we embarrassed her like that.”

“Oh no, scary.” The fact that she really *would* was the scariest part. We already ran into each other pretty frequently without really making an effort to. What would happen to me if she actively *tried*? The thought alone was terrifying.

“Wh-what should we do? I-I promise I’m only a simple colonist. I’ve never been anywhere near the imperial family. It must be a coincidence!” Mimi was even more rattled than I was.

After all, the girl on the screen wasn't just any noble; she was a direct descendent of the emperor. Being the spitting image of someone like that just *smelled* dangerous. Like, what if they tried to drag her in to be a body double or something? Even darker, they might even try to assassinate her to avoid any false claims to the throne. They'd probably do DNA or genome analysis or whatever first—but if it turned out Mimi *did* have imperial blood, we'd be in serious trouble. Heck, there'd be problems regardless, since Mimi and this princess basically looked like twins.

"M-Master Hiro…" Mimi's eyes welled with tears. She unsure of what to do.

"It's gonna be okay. I'm not letting anyone take you away, Mimi." I pulled her into a hug. Any solution I could come up with, she could probably think up just as easily. Elma or Chris might have a better idea of what to expect. I turned to them. "What should we do about this, girls?"

"Hmm… Mei!" Elma called out.

Mei stepped forward and answered, "Yes?"

"Could I ask you to work on something for us?"

"You may entrust me with anything."

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"Hmm… Very good."

I looked myself up and down in the hologram, confirming that there were no flaws in my presentation. As an officer of the Imperial Fleet, I couldn't show even a hint of slovenliness to my subordinates. Moreover, I was the admiral of the Pirate-Hunting Unit. It was all the more important to maintain a strict standard of appearance.

There were times when my life as a lieutenant commander of the Imperial Fleet felt stifling, but it was far better than going to young ladies' tea parties where the girls in question only spread rumors and complained about others. I was grateful to have been born into the warrior Holz family. I didn't mind pretty dresses and glittering accessories, but I was never one for the tea parties.

“Haah…” I sighed. Despite my disdain for the exercise, I would likely find myself stuck at quite a few tea parties now that I’d returned to the capital. However, I had been away on military duty for five years now. Perhaps people had forgotten me and wouldn’t send invitations anymore.

“Good morning, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Morning, Lieutenant.”

I strode to the officers’ dining hall of the *Lestarius*, where I found Lieutenant Robertson already tucking into his breakfast. He was a fine adjutant, offering me his full support and respect as the commander of a small fleet.

I placed the food from the automatic cooker and a cup of black tea on a tray and carried it to the table. While greeting the other officers as they came in, I spread marmalade on my toast. *Can’t they do anything about this automatic cooker? The tea is acceptable, but everything else it makes is barely edible.* If the officers’ dining hall breakfast was toast with marmalade, baked beans, and black tea, then what the hell were they giving regular soldiers? Seeing as we were here in the capital, I considered ordering replacement cookers for every ship in my fleet.

It would be easy enough compared to all the annoying paperwork I’d been subjected to until yesterday. Ceremony preparations and presentation were such a pain.

“Things have finally settled down.”

“Indeed. We can take it easy until the ceremony, if nothing else,” I said, turning my eyes to the holo-display while I sipped my tea. The morning news was dry: some puff piece about the capital’s trees being in bloom, then a segment on Princess Luciada, who had appeared before the media for the first time in ten years—*wait, what?!*

"Pffft?!" Black tea spewed out of my mouth, and I began coughing violently.

"Whoa! L-Lieutenant Commander?!" Lieutenant Robertson piped up in surprise. However, I didn't have it in me to answer him; I couldn't take my eyes off Princess Luciada's face. After all, that was a face that was very familiar to me.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and focused on every single word of the news program. *Oh, goodness me. This could be a big thing… There really is something strange about Captain Hiro. I can't believe… N-no, now isn't the time to think about this. At this rate, the ceremony is going to be a circus. I have to do something quickly.*

"Forget taking it easy," I said. "I need to contact the Imperial Family Affairs office at once!"

"Imperial Family Affairs?! L-Lieutenant Commander, what's gotten into you?!"

"We need to act fast, or this could be disastrous. Come with me!"

I'll have to explain everything to the clueless captain, gather my documents, and call Imperial Family Affairs… Ugh, I've got a headache and a stomachache. Mark my words, Captain Hiro…you will owe me big-time for this.

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After we hung up with Chris, Mimi finally managed to stop crying.

"Ya really do look like twins… Mimi, are you *sure* y'ain't related?" Tina asked.

Jeez, you really didn't waste any time before badgering her.

"I'm not… Mom and Dad were just normal commoners working on colony infrastructure… I don't know anything about my grandparents."

"Hmm. Even if your Mom and Dad said you didn't have any other family connections, you wouldn't know if they were being wholly honest, right?" Wiska suggested.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right there,” I agreed. “If Mimi’s parents never told her anything about it, then we’re basically at a dead end.”

“Yep. But I’m sure we’ll know the truth soon.”

Elma had hardly finished speaking when the buzzer rang through the lounge, informing us that we had guests—again. I glanced at Elma, but she only shrugged. *Okay then.* I brought up the camera covering the ship’s ladder on the holo-display.

“Ack!” I shouted.

“Don’t ‘ack’ me, please.”

On the other side of the display were Lieutenant Commander Serena, who was glaring at me with her arms crossed, Lieutenant Robertson, a few soldiers in fancy uniforms, and a person in a white robe who looked like a doctor of some kind.

“What do you need?”

“Don’t play stupid with me. You know what’s going on, don’t you?”

“Nope. No idea.”

“No more pointless jokes, or you’re in for it.” A vein bulged on Serena’s forehead. *Oh, she’s serious.*

“Okay, okay. But I might legitimately not know, so I feel like you should properly explain. What brings you to our door, Lieutenant Commander?”

“I’m going to be blunt. Your crew member, Mimi, may have imperial family blood. I’ve come to confirm the veracity of this. These are the royal knights Zain and Loretta, this is the court physician Dr. Falke, and this is Mr. Cornell of Imperial Family Affairs.”

The others bowed as Serena introduced them. *Oh, so this is what Elma meant.*

“What do you plan to do depending on the results? Will you take Mimi away?” I asked.

“Well…” Serena faltered and looked over at the imperial knights and the man from Imperial Family Affairs.

"I don't care who she's related to; Mimi is part of my crew. You're not taking her anywhere without my permission, and if you try to take her by force, I'm more than willing to fight for her. I need a promise that you won't try to take her no matter the results, or you're not stepping foot on my ship."

Cornell and the knights exchanged a few words before nodding to each other in apparent agreement. Cornell politely explained, "Regardless of whether Miss Mimi carries the imperial bloodline, we have no immediate plans to act on this information. We will first confirm whether it's true, and then we will deliberate on how to respond."

Well, I guess that's fine? It's not like we can avoid this issue forever. Maybe getting ourselves put under imperial protection would be a smart move, before odd rumors spread or any weirdos try to pull anything funny. Besides, trying to outfox imperial nobility sounds like an impossible challenge.

I looked over at Mimi and Elma first. Mimi nodded, though she looked uneasy, and Elma likewise agreed with a sigh.

"Things are never boring with you around, hon… It's like surprises gravitate toward you."

"It is incredible how he attracts trouble. Like a trouble singularity!"

I'll deny that slanderous title, thanks.

***

We didn't all need to go out and greet them, so Mei and I decided to do the honors. Mimi, Elma, Tina, and Wiska stood by in the lounge. I'd considered asking them to hole up in their rooms, but they were hopeful enough to stay in the lounge and watch over the situation from there.

"Welcome to the *Black Lotus*."

"Sorry to intrude," Serena said.

"If you actually intrude, I'll throw you out," I quipped. She glared at me. *Look, I'm just cracking a joke to lighten the mood a little.*

“This is my first time on a mercenary ship… What a valuable experience.”

“It sure is. It’s much brighter and cleaner than I’d imagined.”

Cornell and Falke, both docile-looking elderly gentlemen, walked through the passage to the lounge, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the interior. The two royal knights might’ve looked at first sight like they were facing straight ahead, but I saw them occasionally shoot surreptitious glances at me and Mei and check the halls for anything suspicious. *Can’t be too careful around these two.*

“Ooh…” Cornell gasped. Was that impressed sound because he’d caught sight of Mimi, or because he was awed by our big, clean lounge? Based on the line of Cornell’s gaze, it must’ve been the former. The imperial knights seemed almost ready to kneel on reflex. “Miss Mimi, please call me Cornell. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“O-okay… Umm, I-I’m really not anything special, so you don’t have to be so formal…”

“That may be true, or it may be false. We’ll know before long. Isn’t that right, Dr. Falke?”

“That’s right. The results will come immediately. May I have your hand?”

Mimi gazed worriedly at me, so I nodded and urged her to cooperate. With new resolve, she timidly reached her hand out toward Dr. Falke. The doctor took out a finger cot, which was attached to his tablet by a long cord, and placed it securely on Mimi’s finger, then started tapping away on his tablet.

“Hrmmm… Well, well,” he muttered as he watched the results pop up on his screen. He bowed his head to Mimi and removed the finger cot from her hand. “Based on these results, the probability of Mimi bearing imperial blood is a fraction of a percentage away from one hundred percent,” Dr. Falke declared. He kneeled before her, and Cornell and the imperial knights followed suit.

“Whaaa…” Mimi trailed off in confusion. Elma and I covered our eyes with our hands and looked up in mute surrender.

Why did this have to happen?

***

We asked Cornell from Imperial Family Affairs, court doctor Falke, and the two knights to give us some space for the time being. The knights stubbornly tried to stay aboard and protect Mimi, but I insisted. I had plenty of experience protecting her *and* I pointed out the high security of the *Black Lotus*, which kept any strangers from entering as long as the shields were up. In the end, they folded.

The only people still aboard were my crew, Lieutenant Commander Serena, and her adjutant Lieutenant Robertson.

"I have a hell of a lot of questions…but first off, how did a blue-blooded noble like you not notice this sooner?" I glared at Serena.

She frowned. "I only saw it while I was watching this morning's news. I noticed how familiar the princess's face seemed, and then it hit me that she looked *just like* your crew member. I was so surprised I spit out my tea."

Serena elegantly drinking her black tea, seeing the news, and spewing it all over the place… I wish I could've seen it. I would've pointed and laughed.

"I mean, what about that…princess, was it? Nobody knew what this girl looked like? Shouldn't nobles like you and Elma know?"

"Imperial family members typically do not show their faces publicly between the age of five and their coming of age. In fact, Princess Luciada only showed herself to the media for the first time in ten years last week."

"That timing…"

"Now that you mention it, why didn't *you* notice?" Serena demanded. "You have a high-spec Maidroid, don't you?"

All eyes gathered on Mei.

"Shameful as it is to admit," Mei explained, "while I did perceive the news that Princess Luciada had revealed herself to the galaxy for the first

time in a decade, other data processing has kept me so busy these past few days that I assigned it a low priority."

"Other data processing?"

"Yes. Creating lists of nobles who might try to harass my master, their locations and current activities, and other such things."

"Oh!" Mimi, the mechanic twins, and I all cried out in amazement; that did sound like a lot of work. Elma, Serena, and Robertson just grinned wryly.

"Regardless, you now see that we can hardly be blamed for not knowing, yes?" Serena insisted. "More importantly, Captain Hiro, consider this a favor I'm doing for you. You owe me."

"Come again? Why? Why, exactly? None of this is *my* fault." *Why would I owe her?* I was quick to express my dissatisfaction.

"It's only because I noticed promptly, contacted Imperial Family Affairs, and personally spent time and effort to come to you that things have proceeded so smoothly and quietly thus far. I'd say that's quite the favor, wouldn't you? Do you know how much trouble you'd be dealing with now if I hadn't acted so promptly?"

"Things might've gotten annoying if you didn't step in, sure, but we were getting a handle on the situation ourselves. We have a way to contact Imperial Family Affairs if necessary, so we could've dealt with it without your meddling." We could've relied on Count Dalenwald, since Chris brought it up. Plus, we could have asked the Willrose family if we needed to. Willrose himself was apparently from Imperial Family Affairs. "That said, I guess we would've ended up in *their* debt…"

"Yeah, that's true," Elma agreed. "Who knows what my father or brother might've said if we went to my family for help."

"And if we asked Chris… Ugh," I groaned. It seemed like Chris still hadn't given up on me, so if we went to her, I might have ended up tied to her after all. I didn't really like that… Well, not that I super *disliked* the idea, but I couldn't bear to give up my free mercenary lifestyle. "Now that I think about it, maybe owing *you* is the way to go."

"When it comes to results…yeah, maybe," Elma agreed.

“Well, there you have it,” Serena replied, satisfied. “That’s one debt…but given our relationship so far, perhaps that makes us even?”

“No—no way. You owe me way too much to call it even at that.”

“That’s true. She still owes us a little,” Elma decided.

“Gnngh…” Serena grumbled but she didn’t press the matter, so she seemed to be convinced.

“So, about Mimi… She’s got their blood, sure, but from whom? If her parents were members of the imperial family who ran off or went missing, we’d know about it, right?”

“You would. However, I do have a theory. From the previous generation—that is, the current emperor’s generation—one name does stick out.”

“Yes, there is one individual who seems likely. Celestia, the younger sister of the current emperor…”

Elma and Serena both said the same name at almost the same time. *Celestia, younger sister of the emperor, huh? That would make Mimi’s grandmother the most likely one. Though we don’t know if she’s her grandmother on the paternal or maternal side.*

“What kind of person was Celestia?”

“…An unconventional person,” Elma answered.

“…An unprecedented person,” Serena said.

According to them, Celestia was a constant troublemaker who loved adventure despite being born to the imperial family. Just before her coming-of-age ceremony at fifteen, she ran away in a small craft she’d secretly procured, concealed her identity to work as a mercenary, shook off the imperial family’s pursuers, and finally escaped their hands. *Hmm. Y’know, I think I heard a story like this recently.*

“…What?” Elma glared.

“Doesn’t this sound a little *familiar* to you?”

Elma blushed all the way to the tips of her ears as she pinched my side.

Ouch! But I get it; it sounds to me like Elma was influenced by this woman when she made her own decision to set sail.

"Ow… It sounds like a story from a book or movie, huh?"

"While they've kind of shied away from direct adaptations, there *are* a lot of works obviously based on Celestia's life," Mimi explained.

"I've seen those movies, too," Wiska chimed in. "I love *The Adventure of the Maxir System*."

"Eh, I liked *Mercenary Celes vs. the Sharkbeast of the Memel System* more."

"Heh, that sounds fun."

This conversation really had that B-movie ring to it. *Wait, are shark-like space monsters actually real? Wow. Sharks in space… I guess if they can have three heads or swim in tornados, them being in space isn't that weird. Actually, maybe that's already happened? Whatever.*

"Anyway, if there's a connection, then the most likely possibility is that free-spirited sister of the emperor. And if the emperor's granddaughter looks just like Mimi, then it doesn't sound that farfetched."

"If that's not it, then you might have to go back pretty far to find her imperial ancestor. But…" I trailed off.

Mimi cocked her head as Elma and I looked at her.

"If that's the case, why were you just left there?" I wondered. "If Elma and I hadn't happened to pass by, who knows what might've happened to you?"

"He's right."

Indeed, that was the incomprehensible part. Even if she'd run away from home and become a mercenary, she was still a member of the imperial family. Wouldn't they still try to monitor and protect her and her family in secret or something?

"That may be proof of just how well Celestia hid herself," Serena thought aloud. "Perhaps she concealed her bloodline, procured a fake imperial citizen ID, and truly vanished into the streets."

"Can you really fake IDs that easy?"

“I don’t like to admit it as a military officer, but yes, there are ways. No human system is without flaws, after all,” she said with a sour look.

So you can? Wow. And from what I’m hearing here, Celestia was a very capable woman, so maybe she had the right connections? Not that we’ve proven Celestia was Mimi’s grandmother.

“Man, all this thinking is making me tired,” I groaned.

“Tired?”

“I mean, it is what it is, right? We’re *all* dedicated to the mercenary life we know and love, and we’ll fight for our right to keep living it. We’ll knock down anything that stands in our way, big or small, and press onward. The most urgent issue right now is the ceremony, but we have what we need, and Serena is taking care of the rest of it. When it comes to Mimi, all we can do is wait and see what happens.” As I spoke, I took Mimi’s hand and pulled her over to sit next to me on the lounge sofa. “I’m not letting anyone take Mimi or Elma from me. No matter who they are. That’s all there is to it.”

“That’s a pretty intense thing to say, depending on how ya think about it…” Tina chimed in.

“Sis, I don’t think it’s anything to joke about.”

“If Mimi and Elma really, honestly wanted to leave, then I’d swallow my tears and let them go… Well, no; I’d try to stop them. Who knows, I might cry and beg them not to leave me.” I pretended to wipe tears away from my eyes. Tina laughed, Wiska giggled softly, Elma grinned sardonically, and Mimi…

“It’s okay! I’ll never leave Master Hiro’s side!” She clung to me. *Yeah, that’s Mimi for you. This feeling on my arm right now is super comfortable.*

“I don’t think I can keep up with them…”

“Ha ha ha!”

Lieutenant Commander Serena and Lieutenant Robertson both made a face—sort of like they’d had sugar shoved into their mouths—but that was their problem.

Either way, we were stuck waiting for other parties to make a move. The day of the ceremony would soon be decided, but we'd probably get a response from the Imperial Family Affairs office before then.

Come at me if you want. I won't run.

Chapter 6:
Her Grandmother's Identity

THE NEXT DAY, Cornell and his subordinates stopped by again to take my testimony. It goes without saying that they called ahead and made an appointment. They really were unlike *certain* mass media types in this regard.

"First, I believe that your own wishes for the future are of vital importance," Cornell said.

"Okay." I sat on the lounge sofa and nodded along.

Despite the word *testimony*, it wasn't anything stuffy and overbearing; maybe "Q&A session" would be a more apt descriptor of what went down. Mimi, Elma, Mei, and I were all present. The mechanics weren't especially close to the Mimi issue, so they watched from afar.

"We have to respect Mimi's wishes above all, right?" I said.

"Yup," Elma agreed.

"Indeed." So did Cornell.

Everyone turned to look at Mimi. She shuddered under the weight of our gazes. "U-umm… Well, being told out of nowhere that I'm a part of the imperial bloodline doesn't feel especially real… Besides, I'm just a normal colonist. I'm also a member of Master Hiro's crew and an operator. Acting like a member of the imperial family is way beyond anything I could imagine…"

"Indeed. It would be unreasonable to ask you to perform the duties of an imperial family member when you've never received a day of such specialized education in your life. However, it is not too late to learn. In this day and age, we have many different ways of learning. If this is a life you desire, we will do everything in our power to assist you. His Majesty is quite excited to meet you, too, Miss Mimi."

"Th-the emperor?! Urk… Wh-why?" When she heard that the emperor himself wanted to see her, Mimi was badly shaken. *Figures. I'd be*

scared if I heard that the head of a nation, someone with absolute authority in a feudal system, wanted to meet me, too.

"After analyzing the genetic information we received from Miss Mimi, we have confirmed that, out of the entire imperial family, His Majesty himself is her closest living relative. Furthermore, by comparing Mimi's data with our own genetic records, we have concluded that Miss Mimi's maternal grandmother is almost guaranteed to be His Majesty's late sister, Celestia."

"Ah… Well, I guess that's pretty much as expected," I sighed. "Any big brother would want to meet a child who's the only memento of his lost sister."

"Indeed."

The theory that Celestia was Mimi's grandmother was basically proven.

"Which means Elma, who admired Mimi's grandmother and ran away from home just like her, ended up on the same ship as her idol's granddaughter. Pretty crazy, am I right?" I smirked.

"This isn't about me right now, okay?" Elma slapped me upside the head as her ears flushed red. *Incomprehensible.*

"Umm, I'm very honored that His Majesty wants to see me, but a commoner like me would be too terrified of making a careless mistake in front of him… Umm, though I would be very happy to meet him."

"I see. Then you're fine with meeting him face-to-face, out of the public eye?"

"Well, umm… As long as Master Hiro and Elma are with me," Mimi said, glancing at me and Elma.

"Hey—" blurted Elma.

Elma was flustered, but personally, I wouldn't have minded meeting the guy. "I'll be careful not to say anything stupid if we meet him, but unlike Elma, I really am just a mercenary with no proper training in etiquette or manners. Let him know he'll have to be a little patient with me there."

“Yes, I’ll be sure to pass that on,” Cornell agreed. “Now, Miss Mimi, am I to presume that you are choosing to continue living a mercenary life with Sir Hiro? I must say, taking a place among the imperial family would afford you a life both safe and free.”

“That may be true, but my life with Master Hiro is as free as can be. We travel through star systems, seeing all kinds of places and meeting all kinds of people. Sometimes trouble finds us, sure, but I’m happy,” Mimi said, looking straight into Cornell’s eyes. “So I have no plans to leave this ship.”

“I see… Well, I have to say, your home is furnished as lavishly as any imperial ship.” Cornell smiled as he looked around the lounge. “I’m being honest when I tell you that His Majesty has no intention of keeping you here by force, Miss Mimi. Please rest assured. He says he would prefer not to poke the hornet’s nest.”

“Man, that remark alone kinda makes me think the guy might be all right,” I joked. *He sounds like he has a way with words, huh?*

“Allow me to confirm one last time. You have no wish to join the imperial family, yes?”

“That’s right.” Mimi was firm.

Cornell nodded solemnly in response. “Understood. Then the empire will continue to operate as if you are a commoner with no relation to the emperor. Your resemblance to Princess Luciada is completely by chance, and our investigation gave no indication of any blood relation with the imperial family or anyone close to it.”

“Sounds good to me,” I chimed in. “But are you telling the truth?”

“Of course. Celestia went missing, after all. And she is…no longer living, I presume?”

“Umm, I think she may be…?” Mimi hesitated. “I remember meeting her when I was young.”

“When you were young?” Cornell’s smile dimmed, and his tone became solemn. His sudden blankness—or maybe it was seriousness—was kind of terrifying.

“About ten years ago, I think.”

“I see. I will include that in my report to His Majesty. Thank you for this valuable information.”

It seemed that news of Celestia alive, even if it was ten years old, was a real windfall to Mr. Cornell—or perhaps to the empire as a whole.

“Sounds to me like she might still be alive,” I said to Elma. Based on the stories I’d heard of her strength and resilience, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she was still out there shooting through space. Mimi claimed her grandmother had seemed young when they met, so maybe things wouldn’t have changed much in the past ten years.

“That does sound like Celestia,” Elma agreed.

“Yeah. Her granddaughter is right here in front of us, after all… And if the emperor is still alive, then it wouldn’t be that odd for his younger sister to be alive too, right?”

Between the stories I’d heard yesterday and some of those holo-videos and movies I’d skimmed, she was depicted as like…Godzilla, but a human woman. What really blew me away was that the majority of those stories were non-fiction.

“Ha ha ha…” Listening in on my conversation with Elma, Cornell held his stomach and laughed dryly. He probably knew it was possible too. This guy was approaching early old age. Thinking about the timeline, he was probably the one who’d suffered most thanks to Celestia’s troublemaking. No doubt he knew better than anyone else just how extraordinary she was.

“Oh, and regarding the environment Miss Mimi was left in…” he added. “During our investigation, we noticed some rather unusual details, so Imperial Family Affairs is looking deeper into the matter.”

“Really? Well, it feels a little late for that.”

“Right…” Mimi looked pained. No doubt she was remembering all that had happened before we met. I put a hand over the fist she’d balled up atop her knee. I could hardly imagine how terrifying that had been for her.

“Let’s hope things get a little better for the people on Tarmein Prime because of you, Mimi.”

“Yeah…”

Obviously, we didn't know if it would shake out that way. Some combination of scheming and dark interests had led to the accidental deaths of Mimi's parents and left her without legal guardianship—so maybe a nice, purifying storm would roll through Tarmein Prime's government, courtesy of the capital. How the investigation would approach the matter was a mystery, though.

"Now, I think that will do for your testimony," Cornell said. "I will take this information back and plot our course from here."

"Thanks. I hope everyone will be a little happier when all this gets settled."

"Agreed. However, you must know that regardless of anything we do, your group will stand out at the ceremony. And if Miss Mimi refuses to be acknowledged as a member of the imperial family, it will be difficult for us to openly protect her. Please take care."

"Is that a warning?" *Or a threat?* I asked implicitly.

Cornell nodded with a look of utmost seriousness. "Yes, a warning—in good faith. You are a platinum-rank mercenary and a hero awarded the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge. The Imperial Fleet, any nobles linked to the military, and the mercenary guild will all try to protect you. And it is commonly known that anyone who picks a fight with a mercenary such as yourself is courting disaster. However…"

"Sometimes, there are idiots out there who don't bother to think before they act," Elma said with a shrug.

"That is exactly it," Cornell agreed. "Miss Mimi is the spitting image of Luciada, young and beautiful. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that someone may try stealing her for themselves."

"That would be annoying… But if the time comes, I'll just kick their ass. And if I can't, I'll take Mimi and run."

All I can do is pray that they're not master swordsmen. Though depending on the situation, I can probably take the fight into space or just turn tail and run. Worst case, I'll beg Chris, Serena, or Elma's family for help. Though I'd hate to do that—just thinking of how I'd have to repay them is terrifying.

“I’ve been training with the sword, literally until I was vomiting blood, all to be ready for any situation. I’m sure I can handle whatever comes at me. Heck, even Mei has given me her seal of approval.”

“Indeed. My Master can more than hold his own against even the most belligerent nobles now,” Mei, who’d been standing by at my side, finally spoke up in agreement. While I appreciated the praise, I still couldn’t beat her in a fight. The power and weight difference between us was just too great… Every one of her attacks was strong enough to throw me totally off balance, and they were too fast to evade.

“Hmm?” Cornell looked confused for a moment, but his expression quickly evened out again. “Well, I suppose that isn’t *too* rare among mercenaries.”

Normally, it would be impossible for regular citizens to get anywhere near a noble in a swordfight. But he must have realized that, if even a Maidroid agreed, I likely had my own bodily augmentations. Apparently, a lot of mercs out there had cybernetics installed in their bodies. Those who fought in their ships often had their reflexes and sight augmented, while those who fought in colonies had blanket augmentations. That was apparently expensive, though, so it was typically only sought out by veterans of silver rank or higher.

“Please do be careful out there. Now, I should take my leave. We will follow up with you once we’ve determined our course of action.”

Cornell left, taking his subordinates with him. Now we had added another major event to our itinerary: a private audience with the emperor.

Chapter 7:
Gold Star

OUR AUDIENCE with the emperor was scheduled to take place after the ceremony. He would not be attending the ceremony himself, but would summon us afterward under the pretense of wanting to speak with the first recipient of the Gold Star in many years.

As for the ceremony, it was set for four days from now. We wanted to make sure we'd be ready, so we changed into the outfits we'd be wearing and received some final etiquette lessons from Mei.

"Master Hiro, you look great!"

"Not bad."

Mimi and Elma complimented me as I pulled on my outfit for the ceremony. I fastened my two sword scabbards on my hip alongside my laser gun.

"Well, thank you." I was just glad I didn't have to wear a tuxedo; those were for pampered nobles. A military-style uniform was a better fit for me, especially since my body was pretty toned from daily training by now. "You two look lovely, too."

"Eh heh heh, thank you."

"It's all in the dresses."

They were wearing the dresses we'd ordered the other day—Mimi in her modest, classy white dress, and Elma in her stylish pale-green one. They also wore earrings, necklaces, and other accessories that added some glamor without being too flashy. In this get-up, they looked like real noble ladies.

"You two really are a noblewoman and a member of the imperial family, huh?" I mused.

"Ah… Mm, yeah, I guess?"

"I'm just a normal colonist…" It seemed like Mimi's bloodline was becoming a taboo subject.

Well, I understand how she feels… It's gotta be a big shock to learn that the grandmother you only met once was actually royalty, and that you've inherited that same blood.

The imperial family was truly loved in the Grakkan Empire. Many of the commonfolk feared nobles rather than revering them; instead of respect toward those privileged few, they felt inferiority. There was real resentment there. But when it came to the imperial family, they genuinely revered and respected them, almost to the point of worship.

One of the reasons Mimi had chosen to keep being an ordinary colonist and operator on our ship instead of joining the imperial family was that they were simply too awe-inspiring for her. Though, of course, I was overjoyed that she'd chosen to stay with me.

"Everyone looks quite wonderful in their outfits."

"They sure do. You look great, hon."

"Yep, it looks really good on you. Very dashing. Mimi and Elma are as beautiful as ever, too."

Mei, Tina, and Wiska showered us in compliments when they saw us.

"Tina and Wiska, are you *sure* you don't want to come to the ceremony?" I asked them.

"Nah, we're really just normal girls. We aren't suited to ceremonies and parties full of fancy-shmancy nobles."

"We don't have anything to wear. Besides, we're not formal members of the crew."

"I mean, I'll buy the clothes," I offered. "It's not like they're that expensive."

Tina grinned and waved a hand in refusal. "I'm not surprised ya don't think tens of thousands of Ener is much, but we still can't pay ya back for that."

"All right, then. How about you, Mei?"

"I am only a maid."

"Oh…"

Mei could hear that I was clearly disappointed. She thought for a moment and finally said, “Though I will not refuse an order from you, Master.”

Heh heh. We’ve known each other for a while now. I’ve figured out how to get my way at times like this.

“Now, shall we begin the lesson?” Mei asked.

“Sure.”

“Okay!”

“Fine.”

Mei instructed us all on conduct at the ceremony. Elma instantly received passing marks.

“Your bearing is perfect, Miss Elma.”

“My memories of this stuff are pretty vague, but good enough, I guess.”

“*Tch*… As expected of a blue-blooded noble,” I groaned.

“Elma is always so elegant,” Mimi mused.

Naturally, Mimi and I needed the full course of training.

“May I leave Miss Mimi’s training to you, Miss Elma?” Mei asked. “If so, I can focus on Master’s lessons.”

“Mm… Sure, but just so you know, I’m not exactly an expert.”

“I will keep an eye on you two to ensure you’re on track.”

“All right. Mimi, get over here.”

“Okay!”

While Mimi and Elma started their lessons, Mei turned back to me. Her lessons were typically gentle, but they came with an uncompromising rigor… She really was strict when it came to this stuff.

***

In the days leading up to the ceremony, I continued my education—not just comportment, but also how to handle my sword while wearing the outfit. When the day finally came, we—Mimi, Elma, Mei, and I—boarded the *Krishna* and followed the Imperial Fleet down to land in the capital. The mechanic twins stayed behind and kept an eye on the *Black Lotus* for us.

"Wow. The capital's incredible up close, huh?"

The sight of an entire planet covered in buildings was overwhelming, to say the least. What kind of system did they use to construct all these? The surface of the capital as seen from beyond the atmosphere looked like countless geometric patterns laid on top of each other.

"It's really amazing… How do you get a planet to look like this?"

"I hear it's all thanks to gravity control and environmental control technology, but I dunno the details. As I recall…the capital's population was around twenty-five billion people?"

"Correct. Before long, it will reach twenty-seven billion."

"I can't even imagine. So they produce food and stuff underground?" I asked.

"Yep. Remember how we saw them making food in the Arein System? They have factories like that here, but they're *way* bigger and more advanced."

As we chatted, we completed our descent. A majestic building rose into view on the cockpit's main screen.

"So that's the imperial palace… Thing's huge." It was like a mountain. Hell, it was like a mountain *range*. I wasn't the kind of person who thought that bigger was always better, but sometimes you really wanted to let people know at a glance that *this* was the emperor's abode.

"All of that combined is the imperial palace, but the family only lives in a small part of it," Elma explained. "Most of it is government and military facilities."

"Aha."

The Imperial Fleet ships leading the way were heading for the military facility in the heart of the palace, where there was a small craft landing dock. By the by, the *Krishna* might have had weapons, but its

systems were locked by the Imperial Fleet right now. The fleet also had total control over our trajectory, so we were basically being dragged behind them.

The regulations were ultra strict when it came to the planet that housed the imperial family—as one would expect. According to Mei, the machine intelligence working with the military to lock us down was pretty much uncrackable. Even with *her* capabilities, she couldn't unlock it.

Still, this was the Grakkan Empire's own protected turf. I'd never need to fight anything off with my heavy lasers or flak cannons here, so I wasn't worried. And I wasn't about to give the empire an excuse to wipe me out of existence.

"We're here."

We successfully landed, the *Krishna* safely touching down on the small craft landing dock. As usual, the auto-docking feature had done a spectacular job.

"Let's do our best!" Mimi wrung her hands eagerly.

"Don't get too worked up now." Elma grinned at her.

I figured Mimi probably *had* to psych herself up to survive the coming ceremony. She was guaranteed to be the center of attention.

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"I suppose the right clothes can make any man… Ahem. Excuse me."

"What was that? If you have something to say, then say it."

As we exited the *Krishna*, Serena emerged from the Imperial Fleet dropship that had led us there and immediately said something awfully rude. She herself was in her usual military uniform.

"Lieutenant Commander, we're cutting it close," Lieutenant Robertson warned her.

"Right. Let us hurry. If the star of the ceremony is late, he would embarrass both himself and his handlers," Serena said. She stepped in front

of us and began walking. I followed her with Mimi and Elma side by side behind me and Mei behind them.

“Walk properly. Imagine you’re already being watched,” Elma whisper-warned me.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. But I straightened my back as I’d been instructed and made sure to keep my posture neat as I walked.

“Okay!”

I couldn’t see what was happening behind me, but Mimi and Elma were probably gliding forward gracefully. Obviously, I didn’t need to worry about Mei.

We entered the palace. A platform lay before us. What kind of platform, you ask? Well, kind of like a train platform—or no, maybe a maglev train platform? It was probably a lot like the goods transport systems in colonies. Anyway, I didn’t know what kind of train it was, but it was a train platform.

“Wow. You need transportation just to move through the palace?”

“Yeah, because it’s so big. If we walked the whole way, we wouldn’t arrive at our destination until sundown.”

“Wild.”

We stepped into the same car as Lieutenant Commander Serena's party, and the train began to move. It seemed to be moving at high speed, but I didn't feel any g-forces from acceleration at all. Maybe it had an inertial control mechanism like the *Krishna*.

"*Gulp*… I'm so nervous."

"Mimi, you can just stand behind me. It's not like I'm about to give a speech." The big shots from the military would probably be talking and giving reports about the Crystal War and everything, but all I had to do was sit down, shut up, and listen. The award ceremony would begin after all that, and when my turn came, the girls and I would all step forward. I was the only one who'd receive an award, but the whole crew was invited to these ceremonies to share in the glory.

"I am a little scared thinking about what might happen, though," I said.

"Nothing will happen, I promise you," Elma assured me. "Anyone who tried to make a scene at the ceremony would only be embarrassing themselves."

"Sure, maybe not at the ceremony. And we'll be summoned to see His Majesty right after, so we might be fine today—but what about tomorrow?"

"Your schedule is packed. I doubt anyone will find a chance to bother you."

"…I hope you're right," I muttered in resignation.

"Hey, cut it out," Elma forced a smile.

"Master Hiro…" Mimi grinned nervously.

I mean, it's us. Do you really think things will go so smoothly? I sure don't! Some unhinged noble is gonna run in and cause some Mimi-related scene. I can feel it!

"I am aware of your uncanny ability to attract trouble, but surely… Well, I suppose it is possible, given my experience with you so far." Serena glared at me. She'd witnessed it countless times by now—between Elma's crash, the scuffle with the Belbellum Empire, the attack on Sierra III, the deserters, the Crystal War… I was a trouble magnet. I had somehow

become involved in all of those, and at least half of them had embroiled her too. But I wouldn't apologize, never! "Watch yourselves. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do what I can." I tried giving her a crisp salute, but Serena's glare remained cold as ice.

***

Eventually, the imperial palace's high-speed train stopped at a station within the palace. This station was labeled EVENTS DISTRICT.

"They not only have a district for special events, but also a station for it… It really goes to show how huge this place is," I mused.

"As expected of His Majesty's residence," Mimi said.

"Quit gawking. You look stupid," Elma warned us as Mimi and I craned our necks to look at all the unusual sights around us. That was easy for her to say, but it was hard to be calm when we had stepped off the train and into a place that *really* looked like the inside of a palace. The floor was covered in plush red carpeting, there were pricey-looking vases and paintings all over, and even huge chandeliers hanging at regular intervals. I felt like an elementary schooler going *Whoooa, cool*, at everything I saw.

We proceeded somewhat nervously through the palace until we saw a bunch of people gathered. *This must be the entrance to the ceremony.*

"Lieutenant Commander Serena Holz," Serena announced to the guard at the door. "I am escorting Captain Hiro's party."

"Yes… Okay, confirmed. Your seats are right this way."

Serena checked us in, and we stepped into the ceremonial venue.

"Whoa. This is wild."

"Wooow…"

The room was so big they could have thrown a ball in there. It was packed with seats, and around eighty percent of them were already filled. A sprawling chandelier hung overhead, and in the rear right corner was an ornate throne… *Wait, throne?*

“Didn’t you say His Majesty wasn’t attending the ceremony?” I asked.

“That’s what I heard…” Elma’s eyes were locked on the same seat. We’d been told that the emperor wouldn’t be here… Did other emperors come to this thing or something?

“Urk…” Mimi shrank away from the eyes tracking her from every angle.

“Just put up with it for a little while…”

Elma and I walked on either side of Mimi in an attempt to block her from view, but it barely helped; people looked at her in shock and turned to one another to whisper. She really did look like Princess Luciada, so I couldn’t blame them.

Mei, by the way, had come as a servant, so there was no seat prepared for her. Those who were there as servants to the ceremony’s attendees stood along the back wall of the venue.

“May I have everyone’s attention, please,” the master of ceremonies called out. “Princess Luciada has arrived; please stand and welcome her.” We all stood promptly. I didn’t have any particular problem with the Grakkan Empire, so it wouldn’t exactly help anyone if I chose this moment to be pointlessly defiant.

As the crowd rose to its feet, a majestic swelling of music heralded the appearance of a beautiful young woman in an elaborate dress. *Yeah, even from afar, she looks just like Mimi. Her hair is longer and her boobs are smaller—still bigger than Elma’s, though—but their faces are practically identical.*

The princess proceeded silently to her seat, that very luxurious throne that had caught our attention earlier, and sat elegantly, her legs pressed primly together. Luciada surveyed the venue until her eyes snagged on us and went wide for just a moment. She must have been surprised to see her apparent twin sitting between me and Elma. Still, her reaction was subdued; she must have heard about Mimi beforehand.

Not long after Princess Luciada’s arrival, the main event began. This ceremony’s centerpiece was the awarding of the Gold Star to me, but there were plenty of other people receiving awards as well. Apparently, they’d

not only summoned people from the Crystal War, but were also using this opportunity to decorate people for various other achievements throughout the Grakkan Empire. In this vast, vast empire, there were people who did work worthy of formal recognition every day. Such ceremonies were held every month or two in order to get through all of them.

"Thanks to the defeat of the Mother Crystal, we expect to receive great bounties of rare crystals. As our research progresses, we may expect continuous—" The ceremony began with scientific and cultural awards. As it wore on, the focus shifted to economic and military achievements. I'd expected this to be a boring event to sit through, but it was surprisingly interesting. Currently, they were discussing the various uses of that same Mother Crystal I'd finished off the other day.

We'd already known that the empire would reap tons of crystal materials from the Mother Crystal's corpse, but listening now, it seemed like they planned to use her as a seedbed for cultivating yet more crystals. Supposedly, her ability to reproduce by absorbing the energy from pulsars remained even after she died…or something. If all went well, the master of ceremonies explained, the empire's scientists would be able to mine crystal materials from her in perpetuity.

Materials from crystal life-forms could be used in laser weapon cores, ship plating, and more. I thought I'd also heard that crystal was a great material for colony construction. It was both sturdy and flexible, and with the right processing, it could retain the ability to recover from any damage it received.

Back in *Stella Online*, research ships equipped with crystal frames or compound armor were often treasured by adventurer players who loved deep-space exploration, since they could go for so long without repair or resupply. They didn't have much in the way of defenses, though, so they weren't great in battle. Oh, but they were more resistant to lasers than ships with your average plating. Not that I ever bothered using them.

Finally, the master of ceremonies reached the end of his speech and the Crystal War award ceremony began. For her exploits in strategizing and analyzing data on the crystal life-forms, Lieutenant Commander Serena was decorated with an awesome-sounding award: the Argent Ray Distinction.

“Finally, for his great efforts in the battle against the Mother Crystal in the Hierom System, and for dealing the decisive blow to her with only a small ship, mercenary Captain Hiro will receive his award directly from Princess Luciada herself.”

“Bwuh?”

“Whaaa?”

“Huh?!”

Nobody told me about this! A flurry of whispers rose up from the other attendees; apparently they hadn’t expected this either. However, when Princess Luciada stood, they quickly quieted down.

“Captain Hiro and his crew, Mimi and Miss Elma Willrose, please come forward.” Despite her small stature, Princess Luciada’s voice carried clearly as she summoned us.

We could only steel ourselves now. We three stood up, and I led the way to the princess. When we arrived, she said, “You are Captain Hiro? This is my first time meeting a mercenary…”

“Oh, well, I suppose I am… I hope I haven’t disappointed you.” I was at a loss for how to answer. More talking would only reveal more of my inadequacies, so I’d have preferred if she just gave us the award and let us go.

“I’m a little envious, Miss Willrose,” Luciada said to Elma. “How I’d love to voyage through space just as my great-aunt did… Please, share a story or two with me someday.”

“Gladly, if the opportunity presents itself.” Elma bowed gracefully. *Yeah, she’s in her element. That’s a viscount’s daughter for you.*

“And you are Mimi, yes? We truly do look alike.”

“Y-yes. Umm, my apologies.”

“What is there to apologize for?” Princess Luciada giggled. *Man, she looks even more like Mimi when she smiles.* “I would love to talk more, but that will have to wait. Now, Captain Hiro. For your heroic deeds in the battle against the Mother Crystal, I now award you the First-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance.”

“I graciously accept.” I bowed and took the award from Princess Luciada’s hand. I should’ve probably expected as much from something called a “Gold Star,” but it was *really* shiny. The red gem in the center looked pretty damn expensive, too.

“If it is your desire, I would be pleased to see you continue to use your strength to aid the empire.”

“Of course. As long as the reward matches the work.” Saying yes too easily right then seemed like it’d lead to me slowly being incorporated into the Imperial Fleet. So even though I felt it was a little rude, I gave her a more mercenary response.

“Well, I should expect as much from a mercenary. It seems the empire should devise a scheme to keep excellent mercenaries such as yourself within our borders.”

“Ha ha ha… Be gentle, please.” My smile turned tense at those terrifying words. *Seriously, that’s scary; cut it out. If I suddenly find myself tied down to the empire, I’m absolutely going to turn tail and run to the next space empire over as fast as I can.*

“That will be all. See you later,” Princess Luciada whispered conspiratorially.

We bowed our heads to the princess once more and returned to our seats. *What kind of surprise is that princess going to come at us with? Elma is usually so composed, but now she looks panicked… That definitely doesn’t bode well. Mimi looks stunned, too. Why are they looking at me like I’m doomed? What’s up?*

After decorating me with the Gold Star, Princess Luciada left the venue just as quietly and elegantly as she’d entered. All the attendees stood and saw her off. Then, the master of ceremonies gave his closing remarks, and the ceremony was finally over. The whole thing only took about a half

hour. It was almost disappointing, given all the time we'd spent getting there.

"Phew, it's over! Let's get outta—"

"You bastard! How dare you say such rude things to Princess Luciada?!"

Q: What is going on in my mind when, having just escaped one annoying situation, I find myself in yet another?

A: *What's that? You talkin' to me?*

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I was shocked that someone would pick a fight with me *then*, of all times. For the moment, I glanced over at Lieutenant Commander Serena. *Hey, do something about this,* my eyes said. She quickly perceived my meaning. Serena's cheeks twitched. After clearing her throat once, she addressed the young noble with the vein bulging out of his forehead. Or at least, I guessed he was a noble, since he was carrying a sword.

"Baron Klias, please let this pass for today. This man isn't even a citizen, let alone a noble of our glorious empire; he's but a mercenary. He might as well be from another country. Would it not be our error to expect him to offer the same reverence to our imperial family as we citizens do?"

"I thought I was pretty reverent?" I remarked. Serena glared at me. *Seems like she wants me to shut up. Okay, as you wish.*

"But it is only by the grace of the emperor that he received both the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge and First-Magnitude Star's Cross of Brilliance," the guy continued in a raised voice. "He owes the imperial family for raising him to his current status, yet he still shows such disrespect! Unbelievable, I say!"

Hey, man, the emperor's the one who decided to appraise me and reward me for my efforts. I don't owe anyone anything, got it? Who died and made you king of the galaxy? Slow down, hotshot… But this isn't looking good. Serena can't fight back when he attacks from that angle. Try a little harder, dang it! This is why you suck, Lieutenant Commander.

“Excuse me, Baron Klias,” I spoke up. “No matter what, I am a mercenary. Mercenaries are rewarded for their work. I, like others in my line of business, don’t work for formless rewards such as gratitude, emotion, or honor. Unlike nobles who might live off their territory’s taxes and stipends from the empire, we actually need to make a living to put food on the table.”

“Wha…?!” Baron Klias was speechless. I saw the shocked faces of other nobles around him too.

“What do you want from me? I’m just a humble mercenary who happened to be in the right place at the right time. I was recognized for my luck and skills. Don’t you think it would actually be kind of scummy if a single award was all it took for me to claim total allegiance to this *wonderful* empire?”

“Mgh…” He’d been hot-tempered before, but he had no words now. This was my chance to land a decisive blow.

“If I am evaluated objectively and rewarded fairly, then I will continue to lend my aid to the empire. In doing so, I will be as loyal as any mercenary can be; that was the meaning of my remark. And as I recall, the astute Princess Luciada understood that and took no offense.”

“Nrgh…”

The princess hadn’t uttered a word of complaint about my response, so this baron didn’t have a leg to stand on. *Besides, shouldn’t I be basically equal to a viscount now that I’ve received the Gold Star? Who does this guy think he is?*

The weighty voice of an older man cut through the crowd: “That’s enough, Baron Klias.” When the man came into view, I saw that he was tall and powerfully built, with a full head of striking silver-white hair, eyes as sharp as a hawk’s, and two swords at his hip like I had.

“Ack!” I blurted without thinking.

“It’s good to see you in high spirits, Captain Hiro.”

“H-ha ha… I appreciate your concern, Count Dalenwald.” Chris’s grandfather, Abraham Dalenwald, had come to greet us. I didn’t know how to deal with this guy; he was always quiet and sort of glaring, y’know?

He turned to Baron Klias. “As a fellow imperial noble, I must say your loyalty is appreciated, but to go too far here would defy Princess Luciada’s wishes.”

“Count Dalenwald, do you mean to imply that my actions defy the princess?” Baron Klias glared murderously at him.

Count Dalenwald took it head-on and said sternly, “She did not censure Captain Hiro. That should tell you all you need to know.”

Into the tense air, a third—no, *fourth*—voice cut in. “I’m sorry to bother you in the middle of this, but His Majesty has ordered me to summon Captain Hiro and his party.” Elma’s father, Eldomois Willrose, looked at us expectantly. Why had *he* come to summon us? Had he told the emperor about Elma during the whole investigation and somehow become a messenger? A mercenary like me had no idea how the power dynamics worked here. But Viscount Willrose apparently worked with Imperial Family Affairs, so maybe his involvement made sense.

“Did you say…His Majesty?!” Baron Klias was stunned.

“I’ll be taking them. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, sir.” Baron Klias, overzealous lapdog of the imperial family, would be forced to back off for real now.

Count Dalenwald took a step back as well. He still had a few words for me, though: “Captain Hiro.”

“Yes?”

“Chris would like to meet you. Make sure to call on her at our mansion during your stay in the capital.”

“I will.”

“Good.” Count Dalenwald nodded in satisfaction, turned, and elegantly departed. *He really only said what he needed to say and left… Maybe that’s why he couldn’t stop the power struggle among his sons?*

“There you have it,” I shrugged at Serena.

“Yes, yes. Go on.” The lieutenant commander, who had really been no help at all in this confrontation, waved her hand dismissively. Maybe she couldn’t speak too severely to noble heads of households, despite her status.

“Are you and Count Dalenwald acquainted?” Eldomois inquired.

“Yeah, a little. Through work.” I sidestepped the question. The details were related to a family dispute, and I’d be a failure of a mercenary if I started spilling secrets to anyone who asked.

“Hrmm… Very well. Follow me.” With that, Elma’s father led the way.

We followed him out of the ceremonial venue. Mei, who’d been standing along the back wall all this time, followed too, bowing politely to the nobles who watched us on our way out. *Too smooth.*

“That really surprised me,” I mused. “I thought he was going to come in swinging.”

“Of course not…” Elma said. “Even the most bloodthirsty nobles wouldn’t challenge you to a duel over such a thing. Although…there’s no telling what might have happened if you had disrespected the princess enough to truly displease her.”

“Ooh, nobles are scary.”

“Remember, you happen to be in the presence of one,” Eldomois glanced back at us.

“Dad?”

“I understand. Milfa and Elfin spared no harsh words in their effort to get their point across. Besides, killing this man now wouldn’t exactly help me much, would it?”

“W-well, yeah. That’s true,” said Elma.

Eldomois rolled his shoulders and let out a long sigh. *That’s a really obvious reaction, but I guess this must be hard for a father, right? Probably. Maybe I’d be the same way if I had a daughter who brought a guy home.*

“Fatherhood is tough, huh?” I said.

“Someday you’ll understand…” Eldomois said miserably, locking eyes with me. He was probably right; I might find myself in his shoes in thirty years, twenty years, or maybe even sooner. I’d have to do my best to be open and accepting, so I didn’t make my daughter hate me… *Nah. Can’t do it.*

We followed Eldomois in silence for a while, then got back on the train heading for the rear of the imperial palace.

“Up ahead, we’ll be in the real imperial residence,” he told us. “The district where the imperial family lives.”

“I see.”

Along the way, we passed through several gates manned by royal knights with swords at the ready. Security was strict since the imperial family lived here. The guards took possession of all our weapons at the very first gate, and Mei was given a bangle-like limiter. Apparently, this device made her as weak as a normal human. However, even if it lowered her output, Mei’s artificial skin concealed special alloy fiber muscles. She was still tougher and many times heavier than any flesh-and-blood person.

“I-I’m getting nervous…” Mimi shivered.

“Yeah, me too,” Elma agreed.

“Stay strong, girls.”

“How are you so calm, Master Hiro…?”

“I think they’re just so high in status that it doesn’t feel real to me.”

Even if it felt surreal, we were dealing with important people who controlled a good chunk of the galaxy. I’d have to be really careful not to say something moronic and make them mad. I was a platinum-rank mercenary, but they wielded the full power of the Imperial Fleet. The difference was staggering.

While I mentally reminded myself not to do anything stupid, we arrived at a gaudy door that was clearly set apart from its surroundings. This must have been the entrance to the audience chamber or something.

“Now, in we go. His Majesty is an agreeable person, but please ensure that you do nothing to offend him.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah!”

“Yep, I already know,” Elma said with a glance at me.

You’re worried I’m gonna blow it, right? I get it. But it’s okay; I can be a good boy when I put my mind to it.

Chapter 8:
His Majesty's Game

INSIDE WAS A FAIRLY TASTEFUL reception room. It seemed…like, two sizes smaller than I'd imagined. That said, it was clear even at a glance that all the furnishings were staggeringly expensive. What's more, it was as if the aura emitted by every single item was slightly different. There was a sense that each of them had a storied history.

In the center of said room, two people sat at a polished and gleaming round, wooden table. One was a stern-looking middle-aged man who oozed big-shot energy, while the other was someone whose face I both knew and didn't know: Princess Luciada.

"Your Majesty, I have brought the mercenary Captain Hiro and his party."

"Mm." The middle-aged man nodded solemnly and gazed into my eyes. It felt like this would be a bad time to look away, so I returned eye contact. The man Eldomois had called Your Majesty—in other words, the Grakkan Emperor—asked me, "Who…are you?" Now *that* was an abstract question. Philosophical, even. It was as if he was saying *What's this guy's deal?*

"Umm, I'm a mercenary, Your Majesty."

"Hrmm, right. You are a mercenary; I've heard as much. But I'm not asking about your superficial background. I am asking who the man known as Captain Hiro truly is."

What is this guy talking about?

"You mean in a…philosophical way?" I asked.

While I stood with my head cocked in confusion, the emperor continued. "One day, you suddenly appeared in this universe. August 4, 5672 by the imperial calendar. That was when interstellar radar first observed your ship in Sector α of the Tarmein System. Without any warning, you popped into existence. There was no time-space rumble as

with a warp-out from hyperspace, and no other energy waves were detected in the vicinity. It was as if you had always been there."

Ignoring my response, he pressed on eloquently. I felt a renewed sense of danger. The fact that he knew so much about me greatly changed my perception of the meaning behind his question.

"I've tracked your movements since then, too. You sold unsourced high-purity Rare Metal and stayed on your ship for some time to gather information. Your search history after that is terribly interesting. Sol, Alpha Centauri, Barnard's Star, Sirius, Procyon, Tau Ceti… You were searching the Galaxy Map for star systems, weren't you?"

I said nothing. The words he'd listed were keywords I'd typed into the ship's computer before arriving at Tarmein Prime.

"Your typing speed, the frequency and timing of your searches for the same words, the speed at which you switched from keyword to keyword… My intelligence analyst says that you seemed to be panicking, looking for something that you thought would be there."

Oof, this is scary. I don't like that there are logs of that info, I don't like that people can see those logs, and I really *don't like that the intelligence analyst can read my state of mind from that kind of data. Note to self: do not mess with the empire.*

"I yield, Your Majesty." I put both hands up in a show of surrender.

At this, the emperor grinned in satisfaction and nodded. "Mm, very good. Reveal to me your true identity, in your own words."

"Okay. But it'll be a long, crazy story."

"I have time. Speak." The emperor glanced to a nearby chair, indicating for me to sit. I looked to Eldomois; he nodded.

I resigned myself and sat in the seat across from the emperor and Luciada. Mimi and Elma sat on opposite sides of me, while Eldomois and Mei stood and watched over our conversation.

The emperor snapped his fingers once, and steaming teacups appeared before us. In the next instant, tasty-looking pastries appeared on plates. My eyes couldn't discern whether this was sci-fi technology or magic…but either way, the stage was set.

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"Ha ha ha! And that is how you and your wonderful maid put one over on those greedy dwarves, received a thirty-three percent discount, *and* procured a whole mothership?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. By the by, the dwarves screwed up again in one of your colonies here. I imagine they're running around as we speak, spending sleepless nights organizing media requests for us."

"Ha ha ha!" the emperor laughed boisterously. "Now *that* is delightful! Isn't it, Lucia?"

"Yes, Grandfather." Luciada giggled alongside him.

These two had expressed great interest in who I was—or rather, in my…mercenary exploits? Tales of adventure? Either way, seeing as how Mimi's grandmother had run away from home in search of freedom and adventure, maybe all imperial nobles were curious about this stuff at heart.

"Take note, Lucia. When you cast your eyes across the expanse of our domain, you'll find that every generation contains people who just have that spark—much like this man here."

"Yes, Grandfather," Princess Luciada agreed with a pleasant smile.

Yeah, I get it. His Majesty really likes me. Not as a friend, but more like as a subject of observation or a plaything to be watched.

"People who have the spark are drawn to fates that normal folk can't even imagine. Where it takes them varies from person to person, but it looks like our man here is a magnet for danger and trouble with women!"

"Careful now, Your Majesty. These days, I wouldn't joke too much about that. Every time someone says anything that could be construed as an omen, things seem to *actually* turn out that way."

"Heh heh heh. If you say so, I suppose you're right. Well, how about I add some color to your destiny, too?" The emperor smirked. *Idiot, stop! The words of a galactic space emperor are way too heavy. This is gonna*

end badly for me, seriously. Yet heedless of my mental protests, the emperor continued. “Eldomois, issue a decree.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“I wish to see mercenary Hiro’s skills with my own eyes. Gather the best of the royal knights, soldiers of the Imperial Fleet, noble sons, and top mercenaries. It’s not every day that we award someone the First-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance, so I’m sure many will want to see whether he is worthy of the honor.”

“As you wish.”

Hey! What are you going on about?! I wanted to jump out of my seat and protest, but Elma quickly blocked my mouth from the left, and Mimi clung to my arm from the right to keep me from standing.

“I leave the details up to you to handle as you see fit. As for the reward… Ah, I know. Once Captain Hiro has amply displayed his power, I will make him and Mimi first-class imperial citizens who will receive landowner rights. However, I will by no means give you a title that shackles you to the empire. If I did, you would surely flee from the capital.”

That’s the emperor for you. He gets it. Jackass.

“If any can defeat the mercenary Hiro, they will receive fortune and prestige. Anything they desire. However…” The emperor’s eyes wandered over to Mimi and Elma, then to Mei. “None are allowed to lay a hand on his friends. That would only lead to a bloodbath. I don’t wish to earn his ire, either. These are agreeable conditions, I’m sure?” With that, he smirked once more.

This guy’s a real piece of work. I’m gonna sock him good someday.

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“Damn it all…”

While I cursed my fate, Mimi and Elma tried to console me.

“It is a direct decree from His Majesty…”

“I think you should just give up, bud…”

One hour had passed since that fu—frigging emperor's announcement of his "Everyone Gang Up on Hiro ☆ Super-Exciting Tournament." I'd been put up in a guest room in the imperial palace thanks to the emperor's "kindness," and I now sat on a very fancy, comfortable couch.

"What kindness, damn it?! This is his way of keeping me confined here so I don't just run away, isn't it?!"

"Master Hiro, shush! Shush!" Mimi rushed to clap a hand over my mouth.

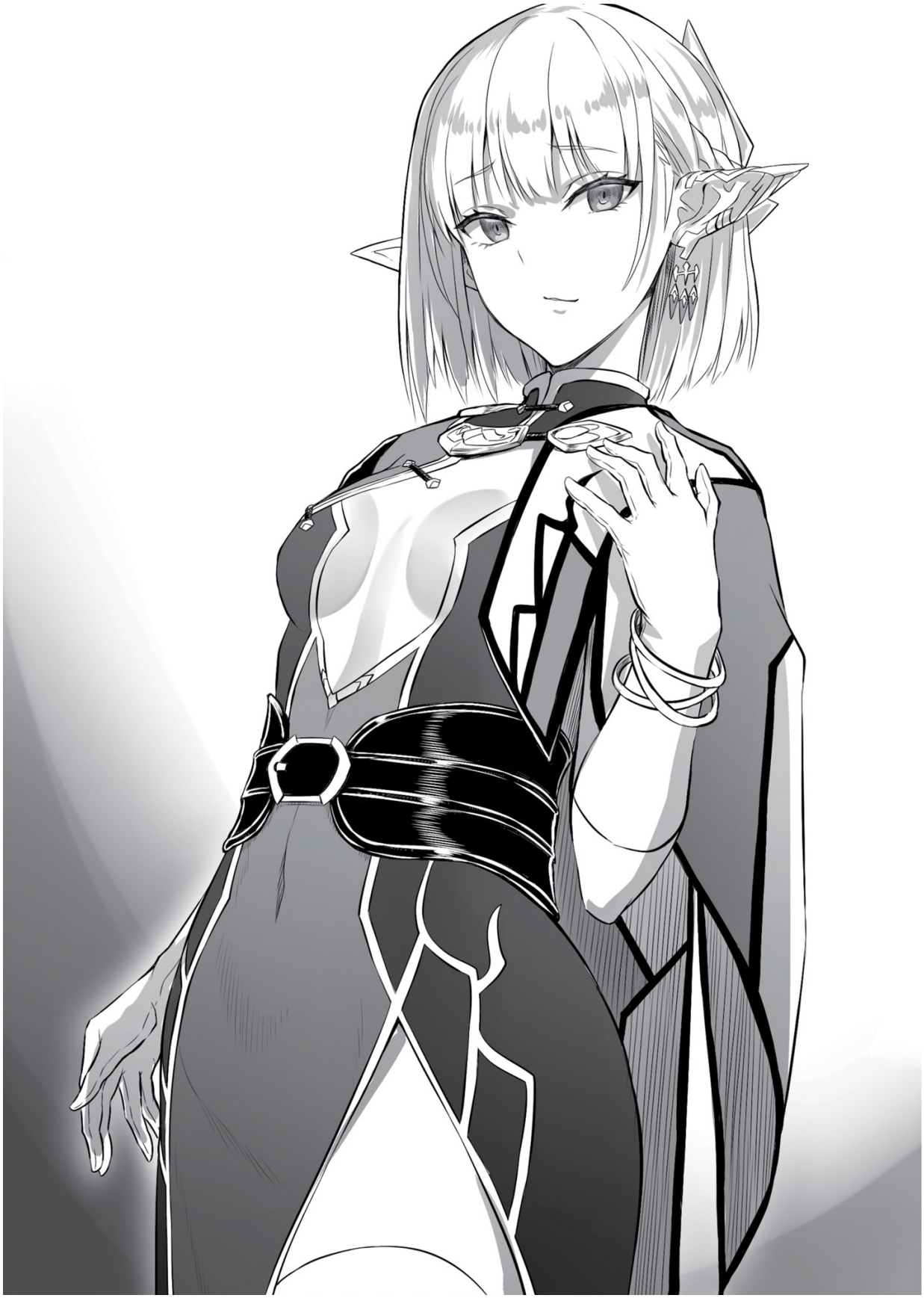
"You never know who might be listening and where. Don't say anything stupid…" Elma warned me offhandedly, not bothering to hide her own exhaustion.

What are you talking about? This is just a normal room… Are you saying they might be eavesdropping on us? I see. It is a room for guests, so I can't say for certain the place isn't bugged. Heck, we can't even tell if this is actually a room for normal guests or for something else.

"Man, I wish I could get back into my normal clothes…" I unfastened the top hook of my jacket's stand-up collar and heaved a sigh. These were nice clothes, sure, but they were way stiffer than my usual mercenary gear.

"Me, too…"

"This used to be normal for me…"



Mimi and Elma were wearing their formal dresses and accessories with ease, but it seemed like they would still have been comfier in their normal clothes. They took off their accessories and carefully placed them on the table next to the couch.

We were having Mei take our clothes and the like to the *Krishna*. I'd tried to go with her, but she told me to stay with the girls. I didn't know if she was really worried about them or if she was just trying to get me to rest my exhausted body and mind.

"What do you think?" I asked Elma.

"Think about what?"

"His Majesty's intentions. Why did he want to do this big game? And why is he having us stay in the palace? I don't get it."

Elma thought for a moment. "For the game, I kind of feel like he genuinely wants to test your skills. After all, you're a rising mercenary who went from bronze to platinum rank in record time."

"Oh yeah? Well, that title sure is a nuisance."

"Yeah, I tried to warn you… Also, him keeping you here might partially be to keep you from bolting, but maybe he's also trying to protect us from trouble? Remember the guy who harassed you at the end of the ceremony?"

"Oh yeah, uh… Baron What's-His-Face, right? Yeah, totally remember him."

"You obviously don't… Baron Klias was his name. Anyway, as long as you're here, you won't have to deal with people like him. On top of that, if you show your stuff in this game, people might be less likely to mess with you in the future."

"Aha. So His Majesty is actually being considerate."

"Well, er… I do still think it's also to keep you from trying to bolt," Elma confessed.

"Yep…"

I wouldn't run away whether he confined me or not. If I ran away after he announced a big game to test my skills, my reputation would be

ruined. It would also look bad for the emperor who had announced the game, the Imperial Fleet that had worked to award me my Gold Star, and the mercenary guild that had promoted me to platinum rank. Could I go on working as a mercenary after tanking so many people's reputations? Obviously not.

Which meant that, the instant the emperor had made that decree, the option to run away had already been taken from me.

"But a game for His Majesty, huh? How exactly will it work? Are they actually just gonna gather a bunch of strong people and have me fight them?" *I sure hope not.* "Or, like, what is the format? We're not fighting with swords, are we?"

"That might be part of it. There's also a chance you'll fight with laser guns, power armor, or even your ship."

"What kind of hellish triathlon…?"

Dueling with swords, fighting mano a mano with laser guns and power armor, and *ship battles? We're doing all of those? Me? I, Hiro? Can I take back what I said and run for the hills?*

***

Once it was decided, the empire moved shockingly fast. An hour after the emperor's decree—just as we had started to relax in the guest room—Imperial Family Affairs had outlined the plan. Three hours after that, they had completed groundwork negotiations. Two hours after *that*, and the event was announced publicly.

The planning for the emperor's game to test the Gold Star mercenary "Psycho" Hiro proceeded steadily. It was announced far and wide that it was a direct decree from the emperor. The objective was to defeat mercenary Hiro, and any who could seize victory over him would be awarded fabulous prizes. Once word got around, countless knights, soldiers, nobles, and mercenaries began applying to join the tournament.

"Am I seeing things, or are there already more than three hundred applicants?"

Am I supposed to fight all of them? I'll die!

It was the morning after the ceremony, and I was complaining to myself as I read the news on Mimi's tablet. *Where did these three hundred bored losers even spawn from?*

"I don't think he'll tell you to fight all of them outright," Elma said. "They'll probably narrow down the number of fighters with some elimination rounds or something?"

"What if they put Master Hiro in that tournament, too…?" Mimi added.

"Nah. It would kinda kill the fun of fighting me if I happened to lose along the way. But knowing His Majesty, I wouldn't be surprised…"

He'd probably be like, *He wouldn't be so foolish as to lose along the way, anyway!*

What's that? You think my image of the emperor is a little too malicious? Listen: how am I supposed to see the guy who said he'd "add some color to my destiny" by giving me my most annoying trial yet in any kind of positive light?

Forget that. I'll never forgive that guy.

Moreover, we'd contacted Serena once things had settled down a bit, and she'd looked *so* sympathetic. "Are you sure you don't have some mysterious power to attract trouble?" she'd asked. The three of us had no rebuttal to her words. How sad.

More-moreover, the emperor's decision to set up this game had blown the Imperial Fleet's plans to smithereens. Our crew was actually scheduled to be covered by the media for Imperial Fleet promotional purposes—Space Dwergr's priority rights didn't apply here since they weren't a public company. That coverage, along with the trials of the Imperial Fleet's next generation of small craft and carrier-based craft that I *would* have tagged along for, had all been canceled.

Their reason for canceling said trials was that it would give the soldiers from the fleet who joined the contest an unfair advantage if I went out and showed off my battle maneuvers. Though to be fair, the Imperial Fleet had data on my battle maneuvers from when we fought the crystals,

and Serena herself probably had my fighting data from when I worked with the Pirate-Hunting Unit. It was a bit like closing the barn door after the horse had bolted.

"Aaagh, I'm nervous." I heaved a sigh.

"Are you really?" Mimi cocked her head at me.

"Fighting with ships is one thing, but fighting face-to-face with guns, power armor, and swords isn't exactly my forte…"

I'd never lost a fight in *Stella Online*, but I wasn't confident that I could pull off a similar winning streak in this world. I figured I could *probably* move like I used to, but I wasn't certain at all. I had the weapons and equipment, sure, but I hadn't trained much.

"I think you'll be just fine…"

"I'm not trying to be the strongest in the empire, or the galaxy, or whatever. Besides, space battles are kind of my thing! Why would they throw in swordplay and gunfights?!"

"Do not worry, Master. Display your abilities as you always do, and you will be just fine." Mei seemed confident in my skill, but I couldn't even beat her in a fight. Still, she was a Maidroid loaded up with all the strongest specs I could think of. Her individual strength in battle outstripped even that of the army's battle bots, so maybe trying to fight her without power armor was a silly idea to begin with.

"By the way, does anyone else feel like there's too little time between the announcement and the event itself?" I asked.

The first part of the tournament, the swordplay portion, was planned to take place two days later. While we're at it, the schedule was like this: First, in two days, there would be a full day of sword dueling. Once that was over, there would be three days of resting and planning, after which there would be another full day of competition: this time, close combat without swords. The third part, ship battles, would come another three days later and take up yet another full day.

In other words, we were stuck there for at least eleven days, including this one.

“Swords are typically used by nobles, and if they wish to join the tournament, they can arrive here quickly thanks to gateways. Perhaps that is why they opted not to wait?” Mei suggested.

“That’s probably it,” Elma agreed. “Most sword supremacists are hovering here around the capital, anyway.”

“Eugh.” *Eugh* was really the only thought that came to mind. “…I just realized. How do the duels work? We’re not going to seriously cross blades, are we?”

“No, duh. They wouldn’t do that for real. They use swords made for mock battles and a special system that judges hits.”

“Whoa… That’s almost pointlessly high-tech.”

“I think we’ve already proven that sword-loving nobles will find any stupid use for tech that they can.”

“Like those suppression ships!” Mimi piped up.

Ooh, yeah, those. You charge in with insane speed and stupidly strong shields, stab into an enemy ship, and then board to fight hand-to-hand…or, well, sword-to-sword. Those ships were clearly designed by a madman, but they actually had a niche use when you wanted to target a specific commander or VIP. You’d be surprised at how annoying they could be.

“Take it easy. Even if you’re a Gold Star merc, they won’t try to make you prove your strength against other mercs in a real swordfight. Even the emperor wouldn’t do that.”

“The fact that you’re saying it like that makes it sound like he’s just excited to see me get beaten up. Is that it?”

Elma went silent.

“Umm.” Mimi, too, was at a loss for words.

Ha ha ha, I get it. I get it. So that’s it.

“All right, it’s decided. I’ll blow ’em all away.”

Okay, since I can’t beat him up directly, I’ll just have to make up for it by defying his expectations. I solemnly promised myself I would do just that, all the while remembering that stupid smug grin on the guy’s face.

***

"Is that so?"

"It is! Master Hiro—"

Two girls with eerily similar faces chatted excitedly at the same table in the guest room. They were, of course, Mimi and Princess Luciada.

"Those two really hit it off," I mused.

Just after we'd finished breakfast, Princess Luciada had paid a call to our room with her attendants. Apparently, the girl who resembled her had attracted her interest.

At first, Mimi was too nervous to talk or even move, but thanks to either the princess's skills as a conversationalist, her natural charisma, or perhaps some mysterious compatibility between the wavelengths of their souls, Mimi quickly opened up to her.

"Sure did… But isn't it heartwarming to see it?" Elma said nonchalantly, taking a sip from her teacup.

"Yeah, you're not wrong," I agreed. I visually compared Luciada's gentle and refined smile with Mimi's adorable one. Now that I saw them so close together, their features really were strikingly alike. It was like putting a mirror up to Mimi. Heck, even their voices were the same. If they wore the same clothes and styled their hair the same, you might not even be able to tell the difference.

Me? I could tell the difference. It was all in the bust measurements.

Noticing where my eyes were pointing, the elf sitting on the couch with me pinched my side.

"Ow!"

"You're being disrespectful!"

The maids and female guards waiting in the corner of the room also glared at me sternly. As the only man in the room, I was not in a strong position.

"…Mei, come with me," I grumbled. "I feel like stretching my legs a bit."

"Yes. Understood, Master."

Princess Luciada and her attendants narrowed their eyes at me as if they were looking at absolute filth. They were all beauties on the same level as Elma or Mimi, so that put even more force behind their hatred. *Man, do I like this?*

Also, I know what you're imagining. But that's not it, okay?

"Excuse me, miss," I asked one of the royal knights. "Do you know of a place where we can practice swordplay? If possible, I would like to use it to train."

"Hmm. Does this Maidroid of yours have fighting capabilities?"

"That is correct. If not for the limiter on her, she would be stronger than a soldier wearing power armor."

"Wow… Oh, I see. She's a bodyguard, then?" the knight said in understanding, casting a furtive glance at Mimi. *She must be thinking that Mimi isn't exactly built for fighting. And she's right; Mimi's only just learned to shoot her gun without shutting her eyes…at practice targets, at that. She definitely can't shoot at real people.*

"So? May we make use of your facility?" I asked.

"Very well. I will show you the way. Richelle and Aina, you will protect this place with your lives."

"Understood!"

It seemed one of the three royal knights would guide us. Given how she'd ordered them around, she seemed like an important guard—high up enough, at least, to have subordinates.

"Follow me," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mei and I obeyed, left the guest room with her, and walked down the majestic hallway. Before long, the guard spoke. "That girl, Miss Mimi, has quite the cheerful disposition. The sight of her chatting so happily with the princess is heartwarming indeed."

“Yeah, Mimi’s a good girl.”

“Indeed. Perhaps that’s why she attracts men like *you*.”

“Whoa, harsh,” I joked with the guard, who glared back at me. “I don’t think I’m as awful as you think I am, though.”

“Has Miss Willrose become your victim too? And I hear you have two other women on your ship as well?”

“Oof, scary! How did you know that? But just so you know, I haven’t done anything with them. I think they’re cute, but it just feels too criminal.”

“Despite the fact that you’ve sullied Miss Mimi?”

“Mimi and I have something of a complex history.” It wouldn’t be okay in my old world, but here it was fine. She was a legal adult here. Though, really, there was an emotional reason it had to be done.

“Complex how?”

“There’s no reason I should have to tell you… Oh, I know. Are you planning to participate in the fight two days from now?”

“No. What of it?”

“Then I’d like you to help me practice my swordplay. If you beat me, I’ll tell you.”

The knight’s eyes went wide. Then she narrowed them in satisfaction. “Good. Settling things with swords is proper indeed. Perhaps I underestimated you.”

Oh, I know what this is. She’s the kind of person who looks pretty and elegant, but she’s a meathead at heart.

***

About thirty minutes later, the guard—Isolde—shouted at me with shame evident on her face, “Just k-kill me!”

“What? No, I’m not gonna kill you,” I replied in confusion, holding one large and one small training sword.

So basically, we got to the training ground, and Isolde and I began a mock battle…which I won right away. I was naturally surprised myself, but Isolde and the other knights were even *more* surprised.

"I-I want a rematch!"

"Oookay."

Isolde picked up the training sword I'd knocked out of her hands and held it at the ready once more. No doubt thanks to her experience as a royal knight, she was agile and powerful, and her swordplay was sharp.

"Haah!" Isolde swung her training sword—made of a durable, heavy plastic-like material—extremely fast, but her motions looked slow to me. I didn't even need to hold my breath and use my weird ability; I was just used to Mei's speed by then.

"Hup."

"Nngh?!" Isolde was fast, but she wasn't as fast or strong as Mei. She didn't have Mei's pinpoint accuracy, either. To my eyes, she had plenty of openings. "Aah?!"

I struck her sword hand with my own blade, making her drop her weapon. She didn't stand a chance until she could pick it up, so I swung again, slicing her and dealing the "killing" blow.

Bzzzzt! The training ground's buzzer blared, declaring that Isolde was dead. That was the fourth time in a row.

"Just k-kill me!"

"Well, the system says I just cut you in half, so you *are* dead."

This training ground was equipped with a high-tech facility that allowed us to use training swords as if we were really dueling to the death. Once we equipped the special headgear and began striking each other, damage was automatically calculated. It even passed on the effects of the strikes.

For example, if your right arm was "cut off," then it would be numb and unusable for the rest of the duel. If your leg was "cut off," you'd fall down. If you "lost" a finger, you wouldn't be able to flex it, therefore losing your grip on your sword. Once you received a fatal blow, the buzzer would

buzz, declaring you dead. I had no idea how it worked. Maybe there were sensors on the walls and ceiling or something?

"He's fighting Isolde off like she's a child!"

"Yeah, he is… But how is he doing it?"

"Isolde, don't hold back. Get serious here!"

"It's okay to hold back the first time, but now you really have to go all out!"

Isolde stood up and brandished her sword once more. It seemed she still had fight in her. "Here I come!" she roared.

"As you please."

Isolde's fighting spirit flared, and she swung her sword once more. It was a simple yet powerful slantwise strike. Her footwork and speed were not bad at all. *Hmm, let's go on defense.* I lowered my hips and focused on parrying Isolde's attack. She was apparently the most skilled among the royal knights, so this would be a good opportunity to learn their formal swordsmanship.

"Hah! Yah! Hup!"

A storm of slashes rained down on me, which I parried, deflected, and evaded. Each was strong and sharp, probably able to deal a fatal blow. If this were a real sword fight, sparks would be flying all over the place by now.

"Too slow."

"Wha?!"

But she was far too slow, too weak, compared to Mei. If I took Mei's attacks head-on like this, my defenses would be blown away. Even if I managed to deflect them, my hands would be too numb to use after one or two strikes. Compared to her, this woman's attacks were like a stiff breeze.

"Yaaah!"

I stopped a thrust with my left-hand sword and deflected it outward, drawing my left leg back. At the same time, I thrust my own right-hand sword forward, aiming for Isolde's heart. She twisted to evade it, but when

she did, I stepped forward with my left and sliced her head off from the right.

"Gnnngh…!"

Bzzzzt! There was the buzzer, declaring her defeat. If this were a serious sword fight, Isolde's head would be rolling on the floor.

"What style of swordplay is that…?"

“I thought some parts were similar to the Geos style, but his footwork and defensive tactics are something else entirely.”

“Maybe I ought to ask him for a duel…”

“I’ll avenge you, Isolde!”

The knights watching our mock battle began to consider joining the fray. *Seems like I’ll have no shortage of training partners, I guess.*

Chapter 9:
The Tournament

AFTER TWO DAYS of practicing with the royal knights, the first day of the tournament was upon us.

"So I *do* need to fight…but as a seeded competitor."

Maybe I'll just have to fight the winner of the tournament? I had dared to hope that, but unfortunately, my hope was crushed. One word from that frigging emperor was all it took to force me to enter the tournament—apparently, it would be "too difficult to determine" whether I was worthy of the Gold Star from one fight alone. The seeding was really the only silver lining on this cloud.

"Just give it up already."

"Do your best!"

On top of that, I was given a VIP box seat that commanded a view of the entire arena. That, of course, also meant that everyone in the arena could see *me*, and for some odd reason, the seats provided for us were a single couch where the three of us had to sit *really* close together to fit. And the couch's perfectly curved back amplified that closeness.

An announcer began to speak. "Now, introducing the star of the show, the man who inspired this event: Captain Hiro. See how cool and collected he is with two beautiful ladies on his arms!"

"You can really feel the spin they're going for here," I grumbled.

"This box was set up by Imperial Family Affairs, actually," Elma noted.

"So you mean that fu—"

Mimi quickly covered my mouth with her hand and yelped, "Master Hiro, no!"

Fair; I'd been about to use a choice word to describe the emperor. *Good job, Mimi. Thanks.*

“Is this the bearing of a warrior?! Despite all the eyes on him, he continues to flirt so openly with his girlfriends!”

“It seems the eyes of our challengers have grown twenty percent sharper,” the analyst added. “Their fighting spirits are honed and ready!”

The announcer and analyst were so annoying I was ready to snap. *Who the hell gave you guys the mic?!* Apparently sensing my desire to do a few murders, the announcer and analyst changed the subject to the challengers in the arena.

“Now that the arena is heating up, it seems our first match is about to begin!”

The first match seemed to be between a knight of the Imperial Fleet and a sword-loving noble.

“What do you think?” Elma asked me.

“The noble looks a cut above the other guy, at least to me. Probably because they train for different purposes?”

“How do you mean?” Mimi cocked her head.

“When Imperial Fleet knights use their swords, they’re usually fighting people who don’t have them. Space pirates, soldiers from other nations, stuff like that. But a sword supremacist practices under the assumption that they’ll use their sword to fight people with swords. I think that’s going to be the main difference between them.”

“I see…”

As I’d expected, the sword supremacist noble defeated the Imperial Fleet’s knight handily. The second battle was between two nobles, but their skill levels were so disparate that it ended in a blink. After that, a royal knight fought a noble, resulting in a clear victory for the knight. There was one fight between two Imperial Fleet knights, but they were close enough in skill that it took quite a few exchanges before a victor was decided. However, in the end, the smaller fighter won. That one was probably a woman.

A staff member wearing an outfit like a maid uniform appeared before me. “Captain Hiro, your match is approaching, so I’ve been asked to direct you to prepare.” Her eyes were awfully cold when she looked at me,

the scoundrel with a woman on each arm. *Those are the eyes of someone looking at living garbage. Ooh, makes me shudder.*

"Well, here goes nothing," I said to my girls.

"You can do it, Master Hiro!"

"I am sure you won't be injured, but please be careful."

Mimi and Elma cheered me on, and I waved at them and followed the maid. She led me to a room where various training swords were already prepared. They were divided by length, shape, and weight, so I chose the two closest to what I'd used in practice and attached them to the belt on my hip. I heard cheers outside; the match must have just ended.

"Best of luck in your bout." Still looking at me like I was trash, the maid offered her surely heartfelt support.

"Thanks." *Look, I didn't choose the couch, okay? Be mad at Imperial Family Affairs, not me.*

"Now, everyone, it's time for the moment you've all been waiting for! The rising star mercenary, Captain Hiro, is about to take the stage!"

The tournament arena was in an uproar. *Am I imagining it, or do I hear more boos than cheers? I'm not imagining that, right? How about I flip them the bird or something? Might as well have fun and play the heel.*

"His challenger is another young swordsman famous for his swift rise, Baron Klias!"

Amid the sound of cheering, I saw a familiar nobleman appear from the other side of the arena.

"I joined this tournament hoping for exactly this bout," said Baron Klias. "It is good to see that I've achieved my end so quickly."

"Ha ha, okay. So your goal is to get your ass kicked and crawl out of here pathetically? Are you a masochist, or what?"

"Mongrel… You dare insult me? You, a mutt of no worthy lineage?" Baron Klias's annoying smirk shifted to a grimace of rage in no time. *This guy seems a little mentally unstable, right?*

"Ooh, scary. If you can't control your emotions, your technique will suffer, O Great Noble."

“I’ll kill you where you stand.” Baron Klias brandished his sword. I unsheathed my two blades as well and assumed a fighting stance.

“Our fighters are ready and raring to fight! Now, let the battle begin!” A buzzer sounded; the duel had begun.

Baron Klias raised his sword aloft and charged. This man was all offense, a manifestation of his aggressive disposition. Maybe that was his special ability or something. I thrust out my left-hand sword and took a step forward with my right-hand sword over my shoulder.

“Tchaaaah!” Once Baron Klias was about ten steps away, he closed the remaining distance all at once and unleashed a fierce diagonal slash. It was as fast as a flash of lightning. I could have used my left-hand sword to meet it—but I didn’t.

I wasn’t interested in taking strong attacks head-on when I knew they were coming, so I pulled back and changed my stance to evade his lightning-like attack. At the same time, I struck with my right-hand sword. It was a fast, but not exactly strong, blow.

“Gh?!”

However, Baron Klias’s hand flew directly toward where I’d slashed. After his first quick strike, he’d come for a follow-up—but I had placed my sword in his hand’s path in advance.

His hand and fingers were judged as “cut off,” causing him to drop his sword. I took this opportunity to mercilessly strike him from the left, hitting his right leg. With that, too, judged as cut off, his right leg turned numb.

Now that Baron Klias had lost both his weapon and his leg, I swung my right-hand sword mercilessly toward his neck. The death buzzer went off, and the tournament arena roared. Baron Klias was aghast. He had lost his head and been declared dead.

“Th-this is a shocking conclusion! What in the world just happened?! Baron Klias suddenly dropped his sword, and the battle was decided in an instant!”

“What fearsome skill. Mercenary Hiro’s every motion was calculated. He read Baron Klias’s attacks perfectly, predicted every move, and made

the baron hurt *himself*. His kinetic vision, foresight, and precision have culminated in a jaw-dropping display of swordsmanship."

I sheathed my training sword and exited the arena. Baron Klias remained, still too shocked to stand. *Well, I'm sure some staff member will carry him off if they need to.*

On my way back to my seat, a single member of the audience nearby applauded me. Then another—the clapping spread until people all over the arena were applauding. I raised a hand in victory as I returned to my girls.

***

"Master Hiro! That was incredible!"

"That's what happens when you get your butt kicked by Mei every day," said Elma.

"Yeah. The fruit of constantly vomiting and pissing blood."

Mei had beaten me down with that same fighting style countless times by now. Apparently, it was a common method among nobles. With one lightning-fast swing, they would cut through an enemy's defenses. If the first was evaded, they would unleash another in no time. A two-hit knockout style.

When I tried blocking the first blow, I'd be blown away. When I tried dodging it, I'd be blown away by the second blow. When I tried dodging *that* one, I'd fall victim to yet another blow… I ended up getting trounced over and over until I learned to counter it. And yes, I vomited a lot of blood. How many times had I spat blood before I learned to counter during the second attack? And when I did that, she'd throw a curveball at me and blow me away again!

How can you watch not just the sword, but also the enemy, and how does that affect your next action? How do you predict what attack will come from which stance? And what stance do you take to counter that, and where should you swing your own sword? The motions were beaten into me until I had the instincts and foresight to answer all these questions.

C'mon, this is small beans compared to reading the limited info from a radar system to predict the flight arcs of spaceships that can go in literally any direction. As long as you're human, the ways your body can move are limited. Once you know those limited ways, it's too easy to predict an attack from any given stance.

If I couldn't predict that, I'd be beaten to a pulp with a stick and throw up more blood. I'd nearly died a few times, honest.

After that, I fought two more battles. My second opponent was an Imperial Fleet knight. The girl was small and slightly built; she didn't pointlessly charge in to attack. Instead, she tried to wage a careful defensive battle. But my ferocious, dual-bladed assault finally provoked a counter, which allowed me to counter her counter and neutralize her.

My next opponent was an older royal knight. He was a tough one; he backed off when he needed to, and he attacked when the time was ripe. But he was still slower than Mei, his sword was imprecise, and he didn't have the strength of youth. I pressed in for a close-range battle and gradually made moves to corner him like a chess problem before finally dealing the decisive blow to his side. A strong foe indeed.

That brings us to my fourth match.

"Frankly, I'd half given up on getting a chance to fight you."

"Oh, really?"

The man in front of me had long ears and a familiar face. "If I win, you will release Elma!" he declared.

"Actually, dear Brother-in-Law, imperial decree begs to differ."

The elf man, Ernst Willrose, thrust his finger in my face and screamed threateningly, as if spitting at me, "Do *not* call me that!" He whipped out his training sword; I did the same. The buzzer signaled the start of the match.

"Haaaah!" he roared as he attacked. But he focused on long-range attacks, never closing the distance between us.

"Hey, now. Got cold feet?"

"Your provocation will not work on me!"

It seemed Ernst had analyzed my previous battles. He was wary of charging in carelessly and taking a painful counterattack. At the same time, he maintained a distance between us so I couldn't charge in and batter him with my swords.

No matter how much I trained, I couldn't win in a battle of agility against an augmented noble. I'd never be able to close the distance as long as he focused on running—at least, not via normal means.

"*Huff*…!" I held my breath, and the world slowed down. This dulled my own motions as well, though not as much as my surroundings.

"Whaaat?!" As Ernst screamed in surprise, a drawn-out sound in my ears, I charged through the slowed world and struck Ernst's sword hand too quickly for him to defend or evade.

"Impossible! How did you do that?!"

"C'mon, you have to assume I have a trump card."

Ernst, shock still plastered across his face, dropped his blade. I struck with both of my swords at once, hacking his torso in four. The death buzzer went off, signaling the end of the match.

"So I won. You'd better not complain about me and Elma ever again," I said to the frustrated Ernst. I turned and left the arena once more.

***

"Oh ho ho. He's better than I gave him credit for," my grandfather said with a pleased look on his face as he gazed upon Captain Hiro, who had just defeated Ernst Willrose.

He was a strange man. Even though he looked like any other common mercenary, his destiny was complex and confusing beyond expression. This man claimed that he'd entered this universe from a different one altogether, and that this world bore a striking resemblance to a game he'd played in his previous world.

Though admittedly unable to understand his circumstances, he'd worked to find success and ended up bringing onto his crew a girl who

harbored imperial blood *and* an imperial noble, while also rising up in the ranks as a mercenary. He reached platinum rank with unheard-of speed and earned an audience with my grandfather.

"Who is that man, truly?" I wondered aloud.

"It's a mystery. What he said may be his own truth, but that doesn't necessarily make it *the* truth. Either way, he and his people are useful. That is what matters to the empire." My grandfather sipped his glass of wine. "First rule of dealing with men like him: do not make an enemy of them."

"As long as he doesn't turn his blade on the empire?"

"Not quite. If he did, we would have to investigate why and do our best to ascertain the cause and correct it."

"You'd go that far for him?"

"People like him can be a handful if you're not careful. Surround them, and they'll miraculously escape and destroy half your fleet. Singular men like him can lead to worlds of trouble, causing empires to turn to dust."

On the holo-display, Captain Hiro felled yet another new challenger. This one was an important noble who loved flexing their authority in the capital.

"Has this happened before?" I asked.

"It sure has. The Grakkan Empire's history is long. Our current empire only exists at the end of many rises and falls. Whenever it flourishes or withers, always there is a person like him behind the scenes."

"Is that so…?" I'd never heard that, but perhaps there are some secrets you only learn when you get to be an emperor like my grandfather.

"Really, though, such men are typically benign unless you actively show them malice. Give them some meager support and their freedom, and things will typically work out. When possible, you build a connection with them. If you get into a fix later on, that connection just might save your life."

"Yes, Grandfather."

Either way, Captain Hiro, Mimi, and Elma were truly interesting people. I'd already planned on socializing with them as much as possible,

so building a connection with them wasn't disagreeable to me. As I watched Captain Hiro defeat his final challenger, I racked my brain over just how to accomplish such a thing.

***

"To victory. Cheers!"

Mimi and Elma raised their glasses.

"Cheeeers!"

"Cheers."

Even though I was the one saying *cheers*, I was drinking a carbonated beverage produced in the capital, while Mimi was drinking high-class 100 percent fruit juice. Only one of us was—well, *two* were—actually drinking alcohol.

"Unfortunate that I'm forced to celebrate defeat," a certain pretty boy complained. The sullen look on his face did not fit the celebratory mood. This, of course, was Ernst, Elma's brother.

"C'mon, Bro-in-Law. We're all on the same side once the battle's over."

"Again, please do *not* call me that…" Ernst heaved a sigh of resignation. He was a lot like Elma in this regard. I guess those're siblings for you, right? Maybe Elma's habits had been influenced by him. "Either way, I lost and you won. Elma seems to hold you in high esteem, and it doesn't look like you're using her debt to entrap her. You defeated famous knights and nobles alike, received the Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge and a Gold Star, *and* you're a platinum-rank mercenary; I have no choice but to acknowledge your abilities. I'd rather you not call me your *brother*, but I will deign to accept the rest of you."

"Say, Elma? Is it just me, or does this guy always talk down to people?"

"Don't give him a hard time." Elma flicked the tip of my nose. *Nngh, what'd I say?*

“He really is Elma’s big brother…” Holding her cup carefully in both hands, Mimi stared at Ernst’s face.

M-Mimi, don’t! He may be as hot as Elma, but… Don’t do it!

The siblings looked to each other and shrugged at the same time.

“Meh, I guess we’ve got similar features,” Elma said.

“Elma and I take after our father in that regard,” Ernst agreed.

“That’s not what I mean, actually,” Mimi replied. “It’s more that you both have trouble being honest with your feelings.”

“Miiimiiii…” Elma glared at Mimi, eyes glazed over from drunkenness, and pinched her soft cheeks.

“Waaah!”

What a heartwarming sight. Not honest with their feelings, though, huh? I accidentally met Ernst’s eyes. He made a rude face back at me. *Hey, what the heck, man?*

“Still, to think that I would get to enjoy dinner with Elma in the imperial palace’s VIP lounge like old times,” he mused. “I wouldn’t have dared to dream five years ago.”

“I wouldn’t have, either. I thought I’d never set foot in the capital again.”

“That means Master Hiro brought family back together! I’m not surprised one bit.”

“That flattery is a bit of a stretch, I think…” I rolled my eyes.

“It’s true, though,” Elma protested. “If I hadn’t come with you, Hiro, I’d never have gone anywhere near the capital again. I’d say it isn’t really a stretch.”

Ernst went wide-eyed with shock at Elma’s remark. Maybe he hadn’t really considered the possibility that she might *never* come home.

“Well… Regardless of how it happened, I suppose I should be grateful to you for bringing Elma home,” he grumbled.

“Wow, someone’s suddenly Mr. Good Guy. How worried *were* you?”

“It might not be my place to say this, but from my perspective, mercenaries are a bunch of ruffians with no loyalty to anyone but themselves. There isn’t a world in which I wouldn’t worry about my poor, frail, beautiful little sister jumping into their midst.”

“Frail and beautiful…? Well, she is beauti—Ow, ow, argh!”

Elma pivoted from squishing Mimi’s cheeks to pinching my thigh. *I was complimenting you!*

“But don’t you remember?” she said to Ernst. “You helped me run away from home.”

“Listen, Elma. An older brother would never overlook his beautiful little sister becoming bait for such unscrupulous garbage. But that is a different matter. There wasn’t a single day when I didn’t worry about my sister out there in distant, dangerous worlds.”

“This guy’s an out-and-out sister lover,” I remarked.

“Elma, your brother is sweet,” Mimi said.

“Overprotectiveness can be both good and bad… By the way, what happened to *him*? I disappeared, so they gave up on the engagement, right?”

Oh, yeah. That Alexander dude, or whatever it was?

“Right. You’ve no need to worry there; nobody would hold fast to an engagement once they learned you’d fled in a spaceship. Father took care of things and broke off the engagement cleanly. If only this man hadn’t come back with you, things would have been so perfectly settled.” Ernst cast an icy glare in my direction.

“Oh? What’s up? You wanna go? I’m not up for a real swordfight. No fist fighting, either. I’m kind of a pacifist, actually. If you really wanna go, then I’ll take a mock battle in our ships, though.”

“Nobody can tell if you’re being bold or cowardly…and you’re obviously trying to make him fight you in your best event.” Elma rolled her eyes.

“You already defeated me in a swordfight once…”

“That’s different. I’m not into real, life-or-death sword duels. I mean, if I get hit, it’ll hurt. I’ll bleed. I might even die! But I’ll never lose in my

ship."

"That's some confidence you've got there," Ernst said sarcastically.

"Of course. I have a Gold Star, after all," I smirked.

Heh heh heh, that's right. I have a Gold Star and I'm platinum rank! I'm confident I'll never lose a one-on-one dogfight. I hadn't played much PvP because I didn't like it, but when you play as a mercenary, you naturally end up good at fighting other people; after all, there were space pirates and space pirate role-players. I'd also had to fight tons of space beasts.

"Hmm… The face-to-face fighting tournament is in four days, right? You'd best not shame yourself there."

"Hey, speaking of. What do you actually do in that tournament? You don't fight with power armor and laser guns, do you?"

The sword fighting tournament involved fighting with training swords, while the dogfighting tournament would basically be mock battles in our ships. But you couldn't exactly do normal face-to-face fighting in a tournament setting that easily. Most fighting in this style was done by boarding large craft and battleships, sending crew members on board, and seizing the enemy forces that way. You'd never fight one-on-one, and there would always be differences in equipment. How the heck were you exactly supposed to test people's skills like that?

"Oh, you really don't know? Then allow me to enlighten you." Ernst launched into a long lecture on face-to-face fighting competitions. To summarize it for you, these competitions were like extreme obstacle courses. Kinda like that *Ninja Warrior* show.

First off, it was assumed that everyone would compete using gear they'd prepared ahead of time. This naturally meant that the rich had an advantage, but since this competition was meant to reflect real circumstances, it considered economic power a component of one's strength. Fairness in equipment was abandoned from the jump. If the enemy had better gear than you, then it was your fault for not preparing better.

Uh, that's extreme.

Participants would then enter their own battlefields and begin fighting. The battlefields were devised with various scenarios in mind: for example, there were some that simulated an enemy charge into your ship, some that simulated fights in colony cities, and some that simulated fighting in thick terrestrial forests.

The Imperial Fleet training ground combined holograms and replicators to create these environments in no time, which was what allowed this tournament to work.

"Now *that* is a wild waste of tech," I mused.

"Oh yeah, and battle bots and prototypes made by robot manufacturers with factories in the capital will play the role of your enemy," Ernst added. "They'll collect battle data, as well."

"Never miss an opportunity to profit, huh?"

There had to be some problems with data confidentiality or something, right? *But okay, your equipment is up to you. Makes sense. I'll have to read the rules carefully later. Oh, and I'd better have all the weapons sent from the* Black Lotus*. I have the ones I moved from the* Krishna*, too. But should I buy the consumables here? My most-used weapons and the power armor are on the* Krishna*, so maybe I just need to have them get grenades and ammo for me.*

"Master Hiro's got an evil look on his face right now…"

"He's planning something devious, for sure," Elma agreed.

"What are you talking about? Libel and slander! I wasn't planning to use a small reactive warhead at all."

"I should hope not!" Ernst gasped. "Elma, is this man quite right in the head?"

"He is… Well, I dunno. He did use a Singing Crystal…"

"A Singing Crystal?!"

Hey, that's enough, Elma! That was a gray move that leaned way too close to black. If people knew about that, I wouldn't get off easy. Let's not speak another word of it, okay? I mean, I'm just planning to use my equipment efficiently. What's wrong with that? Don't worry about it.

“More importantly, I’m a little curious about this engagement Elma mentioned,” I said. “Hey, that guy isn’t gonna come and make a pass at you, is he?”

“I doubt it, but if he does, I promise it won’t cause any trouble.” Elma poked out her lip in a pout. I poked her forehead in response.

“Silly. I’m not worried about *that* kind of trouble. I was just thinking of how we could be prepared for it if you thought it was likely.”

“Would you please stop flirting with my sister right in front of me?” Ernst groaned.

“Nope. So, what’s that guy like? I can tell Elma didn’t like him, obviously, but you don’t seem to either, ol’ Bro-in-Law of mine.”

“Again, please… Ugh, forget it. Elma’s former fiancé is the second son of Marquis d’Elzar. He is trash that loves women more than anything. While that in itself could be fine, he has a way of, ah, using his family’s authority to get what he wants.”

“He sounds like a cliché scumbag noble—but why do they let him get away with that? I mean, even if the guy is a marquis’s son, can they really just force Elma to marry the guy?”

Marquises were obviously higher on the ladder of nobility than viscounts. But that couldn’t be reason enough for someone to force their adorable daughter to marry a man with such a nasty reputation.

“The marquis himself begged Father to have Elma wed to his son. His constant debauchery was such an issue that they were trying to shackle him down using Elma.”

“But why…”

“Beyond Elma’s beauty, she was known to have a firmness and determination worthy of the Willrose name… But of course, that only resulted in her fleeing the capital.”

“She was so firm that she could hold down a debauched son of a noble, you me—gaaaaah?!” I was interrupted by Elma seizing my arm and twisting my joint, trapping and tormenting me. *But it’s the truth! It is!*

“Umm… Well, is there any chance that this son of d’Elzar will try to contact Elma again?” Mimi asked.

"His Majesty has already decreed that no one may lay a hand on that man's—Hiro's—friends. You and my sister are off limits per the tournament guidelines, and that extends to the two mechanics who accompany you. That decree may lapse once the tournament is over, but nobles will still hesitate to make a move against you. They fear provoking His Majesty's wrath. And I should think that there is no good reason to fear."

I rubbed my arm, now released from Elma's vise grip, and said, "So you're saying there's a *chance*, but it's small."

Ernst nodded. "I can't refute the possibility entirely. Of course, there are men who don't know the meaning of restraint. However, I would say that Miss Mimi is in more danger than Elma in that regard."

"Me?!" Mimi reeled back theatrically. I wasn't surprised; Mimi would be the easier one to go after, especially for this d'Loser guy. Elma was a viscount's daughter. If this scumbag laid a hand on her, he could make an enemy of Viscount Willrose. Meanwhile, in the public eye at least, Mimi was just an ordinary citizen. A noble willing to use his power for his own selfish whims would see her as an easy target who would cause no trouble for him.

Princess Luciada would be too lofty a goal for a marquis's second son. Hell, he probably would never even get the chance to meet her face-to-face. But what if there was a commoner out there who looked like her twin? A woman-obsessed sleazeball like him would probably be squirming at the opportunity.

"Regardless, you do think it's pretty unlikely, right?" I confirmed. She might not have seemed like it compared to Princess Luciada, but as a member of my crew, Mimi was in point of fact an untouchable being for imperial nobles. I'd already demonstrated my strength with a sword, and I planned to do more of the same in the coming tournaments. No normal person would do something to make me, the incarnation of physical power, angry.

"Well, yes, normally. But…he is no normal man."

"Right. He's not normal…" I sighed.

Seems like we still can't rest easy. Ugh, what a pain. For now, I'll focus on preparing for the tournament four days from now. No matter what,

I still need to handle the objectives right in front of me.

***

Three days passed, and the morning of the tournament came. Those three days were…not at all peaceful.

"My name is Shunji Gaiden! I wish to challenge you to a sparring match!"

"Know me as White Rose! I challenge you to a duel! Or a mock battle; I'm fine with either!"

"Sir Hiro, let's train! The royal knights await!"

A sword supremacist who hadn't entered the tournament, a weirdo with a white mask and white robes with a rose motif, a shameless yet beautiful royal knight—these people would not shut up about duels, challenges, training, on and on and on. *Can't you see I'm preparing for the next portion of the tournament?!*

And you, knight! Royal knight, whatever! Get rid of that white weirdo! What are you doing?!

"Well, actually, we know Mikhail's—Sir White Rose's identity."

Dude. You can't even keep your secret identity a secret?

"Pretend you didn't hear that. He is the mysterious swordsman, White Rose. He bears no relation to Duke Graizes. Understood?"

Oh, I get it. Everybody knows he's just a little rich boy cosplaying, but nobody says anything. Or rather, they can't.

"He isn't the type of person to do wrong intentionally. In fact, when other nobles use their own information nets to do underhanded deeds, he calls them to account. He honestly is a hero to an extent, though unfortunately he will occasionally blunder so much that we're forced to clean up after him."

Oh, so he's like one of those old idiots in cartoons, but given real power. Nobles' sons do have a bit of authority to throw around, after all. Incidentally, White Rose had just received a judo strike from a maid and

fainted. He was in the process of being hauled off as we spoke. That was another calm and cool maid, though not quite in the same way as Mei. *I think White Rose and I could get along.*

Thus, I proceeded with my preparations for the tournament while shaking off the many incarnations of trouble that came to my door. This was a surprisingly difficult task; the really annoying part was having to provide a list of what I'd bring to the tournament in advance.

But if I was going to do this, I planned to go all in. I'd have a whole lot of stock to replace once this was over. The imperial family generously offered to reimburse used grenades, ammunition, energy packs, and other such consumables. *I'm gonna make that damn emperor's jaw drop when he sees the sum.*

Actually, no. That's not gonna work. No matter how many consumables you use in a land battle, it can never add up to that much. It might go up to a few tens of thousands of Ener, at best. Anyway, I'll just have to take care of this without thinking about anything unnecessary.

***

"Are you okay, Master Hiro?" Mimi asked, looking up at me in worry.

We were at the training ground I mentioned, which had been made into an arena. Temporary audience stands had been set up for the tournament, making it really look like a stadium. They normally didn't have events at military training grounds, so naturally there was no permanent audience seating. The fact that they had used the training ground's battlefield generation function to make temporary seating was proof of the incredible scale of the empire's activities.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just reflecting on the past three days."

"Ah ha ha… It was rough, wasn't it?" Mimi said with a tired grin.

Princess Luciada had been inviting her to tea parties daily, so she had it rough in her own way. Preparing for today and dealing with the idiots

challenging me kept me hopping, so I didn't get to check in with Mimi much. But it seemed like they were getting on well.

Among the three of us, Elma had been the one who got to relax the most. She would quietly drink tea, read books on her tablet, join Mimi at Luciada's tea parties, and stuff like that.

"Be extra careful today, got it?" she warned me.

"Got it. I'll stay focused." I was up against battle bots, after all. Even if it was a simulation, it *was* possible for their energy cells to explode, so I'd need to keep my wits about me. At least the tournament organizers provided training weapons to avoid injuries, so that was one less thing to worry about. "Okay, I'm off. Let's go, Mei."

"Yes, Master."

With Mei in tow, I made to exit the booth that we were using a waiting room—but suddenly, Elma stopped us.

"Hold on a sec. Why are you taking Mei?"

"Huh? I mean, she's part of my equipment."

"Bwuh?"

"Huh?"

Elma and Mimi gasped, eyes wide from surprise.

***

"Finally, the day has come: the second portion of the emperor's tournament! Let's go over the rules again: each contestant will use their own equipment to contend with this harsh battlefield! Of course, careless acts will lead to 'death,' ending that challenger's run. If both challengers have been designated dead, the victory will be decided based on their scores!" The announcer's voice traveled well, echoing throughout the audience stands set up on the training ground. The audience—mostly nobles—cheered uproariously. I stood among them, wearing my power armor and waiting with Mei along with the other contestants.

Today, I had come with my power armor, the Rikishi Mk. III, and two hatchet guns. The weapon mount on my back also had a plasma grenade launcher. It was an auto-grenade launcher that used the power armor's targeting system, and it was loaded with plasma grenades that whipped up super-high-temperature explosions. I could destroy most obstacles with this baby. The Rikishi also had shoulder-mounted laser guns and more, and my two hatchet guns were laser shotguns that could handle close-range battle with ease.

"The star of the show, Captain Hiro, seems to be wearing an evil-loo —er…intimidating power armor!"

"Hmm. That is a model I've never seen before. It's clearly a heavyweight power-type; presumably it's meant for fighting other forms of power armor."

"Interesting! And for some reason, he seems to have a Maidroid by his side."

"According to the documents I've received, tournament management received an inquiry three days ago regarding whether a Maidroid could be registered as equipment. The organizers accepted it, stating that there was no particular reason to deny that request."

"I see. But Maidroids aren't typically built to fight, are they…? Though the little lady down there is holding quite the weapon!"

Mei was holding a laser launcher that the mechanic twins had graciously modified for us. Specifically, they'd added a pretty gruesome-looking exterior layer to the weapon so Mei could smack enemies with it and keep it intact. It was double its previous weight now, but that was no problem for Mei. And, of course, the organizers had removed her limiter for the tournament.

"So it seems. I've heard that Captain Hiro has many female crew members, so perhaps she's been customized to perform bodyguard duties as well."

"I see… But if she is allowed, then I have to wonder if some contestants may be interested in bringing their own battle bots."

"Battle bots are forbidden by the rules. It seems Captain Hiro has successfully threaded his way through a loophole," the analyst said with a

sardonic grin.

Thanks to Mei's customizations, her main body alone cost 470,000 Ener, and the options and equipment were even more expensive. If people were to buy battle bots with the same sum, they'd be able to get more than just one. In terms of stats, they might even be able to get one that outstripped Mei herself. Maidroids were typically bought for service and companionship, so spending as much money as I had on her was kind of insane.

"Not that I regret it for a minute," I muttered.

"Master?"

"Oh, nothing. Show off your strength as much as you want."

"Of course. Please leave it to me."

***

"Haaah!" I fired both hatchet guns madly, mopping up the battle bots blocking our path with diffused laser beams. "Take thiiis!"

When battle bots leapt out from both sides of the path, I smashed them with the hatchet guns. Mei also swung her modified laser launcher around, literally crushing the poor things. *Man, is that launcher okay? I hope it's not broken inside now.*

"Mei, where's our target?"

"Behind two walls."

"Got it!"

I blew the walls away with my plasma grenade launcher, and we charged in. Between my two hatchet guns and shoulder-mounted lasers, along with Mei's laser launcher, the battle bots in the room were mowed down in a blink. Due to our entry from an unexpected angle, they reacted too late. That short delay decided the battle.

"Captain Hiro has reached the goal! His opponent is still only midway through stage two! Whoops, they've surrendered! Seems like they saw no chance of a comeback."

“I’d say so. These rules greatly advantage those who can complete the objective quickly rather than rack up their score along the way. One may be more likely to die carelessly if they focus too much on hurrying through, but clearing at an overwhelming speed makes it nigh impossible for one’s opponent to make up the difference. Thus, they gracefully accepted defeat.”

The military announcer and analyst continued to discuss the situation.

“Captain Hiro is a truly skilled contender, isn’t he?”

“One can’t underestimate the advantage of his Maidroid and power armor, but more than that, he clearly has experience. His positioning is precise, and he doesn’t hesitate to make strategic decisions on the fly. He would do quite well as a foot soldier of the Imperial Fleet. I’d love to have him in my squad.”

No, thanks. I don’t wanna spend every day fighting for my life with a bunch of macho dudes.

In the end, I won my second day in the tournament. *Yeah, having Mei is basically cheating.*

***

That evening, I had dinner with Princess Luciada instead of my usual girls. Or maybe I should say I alone had been invited to dine with her.

“You would be fantastic as a soldier or a knight.”

“Mm, I suppose… Your compliments honor me.”

Right after the end of the tournament, a royal knight had come and passed on some gracious words from His Majesty himself: *As a reward for your successes, you are permitted to dine with my granddaughter.* I’d asked Elma and Mei if it would be a big deal if I refused, and they told me to give up and accept it. That brings us to my current situation.

“Princess Luciada, you’re looking very lovely today…is what I should say, I guess?”

Princess Luciada was wearing a dress and accessories worthy of her station. The subtle amount of makeup on her face made her look even more

extraordinarily beautiful. That word came to mind more than cute did for her. Mimi could only ever be cute no matter how she tried, so this loveliness in Luciada was probably a result of her born grace and minor differences in the way the two girls held themselves.

"Then I shall reply, 'Thank you very much.'"

"You look tired of flattery," I replied. Princess Luciada smiled faintly at my banter. *Yeah, I get it.* "By the way, just between you and me, would you be the one who set up this dinner?"

"What makes you think so?"

"I'm sorry if this comes off as rude, but it seems a little too subdued a reward for His Majesty. I know how he loves big, flashy things." That stupid emperor would surely try to reward me with something flashier and more annoying, like handing me the rights to live on some godforsaken planet on the undeveloped frontier. *I mean, he seriously would, right?* I was scaring myself now.

"Do you find it boring to dine with me?"

"I don't mean to imply that at all. Also, stop puffing up your cheeks like that; it's too cute." Those dissatisfied, pouty cheeks changed my assessment of her from beautiful to adorable in no time. She really was just like Mimi when she let that composed expression go.

"I'd had no opportunities to speak with you at length, so I asked His Majesty to create one. I confess it is disappointing that you seem displeased by that."

"Don't pout, please. I'm not displeased at all, I promise."

"Is that so? But Captain Hiro, you seem to be avoiding me," Princess Luciada accused me, her brow furrowed.

"…Uhh." I averted my eyes. "That's mostly because you and Mimi look so much alike… I worry that I might get too comfortable and do something rude, so I've been keeping my distance. That's all."

"How do you mean?"

"Basically, when you furrow your brow like you're doing right now, I just want to apologize over and over and tousle your hair… Also, I'm bad at speaking politely. Sorry."

Of course, I could be as polite as any other person. Sure. But I was too uncomfortable dealing with an imperial princess; I didn't want a single mistake causing a royal knight to whip out their sword, so I'd just avoided approaching her entirely.

"But I would like to speak with you," she insisted. "Don't worry about how polite your language is. Nobles are one thing, but I won't force mercenaries like you or normal girls like Mimi to use such formal language. I won't let anyone else find fault with you, either."

"Well, thank you very much," I replied. *So you say, Princess, but I've already had one weirdo attack me over the way I spoke to you. I can't help but be a little wary after that.* "Regardless, I don't have any problem with you, Princess. If anything, I'm only taking the necessary measures to protect myself. I guess you could call it knowing my place."

"Then from now on, you do not need to be so considerate. You may speak with me just as frankly as Mimi and Elma do. I swear on my name that it is permissible."

I glanced at the female royal knight glaring daggers at me and said, "I'll hold you to that, okay?"

The knight—I didn't know her; apparently Isolde was out today—glared even more now. But since I had permission from the princess herself, I decided to ignore it.

"Yes. Please do," Luciada replied. She, too, shot a glance at the knight. The knight averted her eyes. *That's the power of the imperial family for you.*

"Then I'll take you up on that… So, what would you like to talk about?"

"I'd like to hear your story of the battle with the crystals, from the start."

"Okay. But I'm not a minstrel or anything, so don't expect it to be too flowery or anything."

"That won't do. I expect many flowers," Princess Luciada said teasingly with a big smile on her face.

“Aww… High standards.” I scratched my head and began telling my story of the Crystal War.

***

It was the morning after Luciada and I had begun talking normally to each other. When we’d begun to run out of topics, I’d told her about Chris. Of course, I didn’t leak any details; I just shared that I was wrapped up in some Dalenwald family affairs and spent some time with Christina. I also showed the princess some holo-pictures and videos we’d taken during our time on the resort planet Sierra III.

That seemed to pique Princess Luciada’s curiosity, so the following day she invited Chris to the imperial palace to join our next tea party.

And then…

“Hic! Waaaah, Chriiiiiis!” After hearing about everything Chris had gone through, Princess Luciada cried and pulled her into a hug.

“Nnh?!”

Hugging her was okay and all, but the size of her boobs seemed to be causing a prob—*wait. Huh?* “I feel like I’ve seen this before,” I mused.

“For sure.”

“U-umm, excuse me, Princess? Chris is having trouble breathing.”

“Waaaah, Chriiiiiis!”

Mimi pulled Chris away from Princess Luciada. Come to think of it, the princess treated Chris a lot like Mimi did, probably for obvious reasons.

“You could’ve resisted, Chris.”

“But she is *the princess*. I could never…” Chris shook her head, red-faced from lack of oxygen. *I guess it would be hard for a noble to shake off a royal hug.* “Still, I was quite surprised to receive a letter of invitation from the princess herself.”

“I’m really sorry,” I apologized.

“Hee hee, you don’t have to apologize. I get to see you, Mimi, Elma, and Mei again, and it is an honor to receive an invitation directly from Princess Luciada.”

“I swear I’ll make it up to you.”

“Really? Well, I look forward to it,” Chris said with a smile. *Man, she really has grown. She’s taller, and her expressions and general vibe just feel so much more mature.*

“How long are you two just gonna ignore the princess and stare at each other?” Elma groaned.

“Mmmgh… I won’t lose, Chris!” Mimi chimed in.

“Wow…”

Why is Princess Luciada staring at us with starry eyes? I don’t know what she’s expecting, but nothing that exciting is going to happen. I mean it, okay? Nothing. Huh, maybe there’s a chance? I might get stabbed? Nah, I think I’m fine. I hope.

“Uh, *ahem ahem*,” I cleared my throat nervously. “So, Chris, you told Princess Luciada about your circumstances. Does that mean we can tell her what happened in the Sierra System?”

“Yes. It would be wrong of us to conceal what happened, so we’ve already reported it to the Grakkan Empire. I also have permission from my grandfather to speak of it.”

“Okay. Guess it’s time we told you about the Sierra System, then.”

Thus, we told Princess Luciada everything that had happened.

“That is awful,” she said. “My opinion of you has genuinely worsened.”

“Why, exactly…?”

“How could you leave Chris behind?! You were supposed to be her knight…!” So Luciada didn’t like that I’d rejected Chris and left her behind once all was said and done. I glanced at Chris. She was looking back at me.

“He is *awful*. How could he leave such a tender, innocent girl behind?” Chris piled more criticism on me, to which I had no response. “Hee hee, I’m kidding. Princess, Hiro lives in a world that I can’t survive

in. Furthermore, he can't live as Hiro in my world. If I was in his world, I would die; if he was in my world, he would no longer be himself. I just didn't understand that at the time."

"Mm… But is there nothing that can be done?" Luciada looked askance at me, as if to say *If only you and your crew could have made things work with Chris, you could've had a sweet, happy ending.* To be fair, she wasn't entirely wrong.

"Princess, birds cannot survive underwater, and fish cannot live in the sky. But sometimes, they may touch at the water's surface. In much the same way…" Chris sidled up to me and looked into my eyes passionately. That fervor in her eyes looked real.

Wait, wait, hold up a second. What is this supposed to mean? I rejected you and even made you cry back then. Why don't you just give up?

Chris continued, "It's only a rumor, but I hear that you'll be receiving terrestrial landowner rights if you can emerge victorious from this tournament?"

"Y-yeah."

"Then you would be able to build a base on some planet, no? Why don't you build a mansion on Dalenburg, back in the Dexar System? We can be quite accommodating."

"That does sound like a good idea," Elma agreed with utmost sincerity.

That was a fair point; a system governed by Count Dalenwald would come with connections and accommodations. If Chris herself said so, then it had to be true. I had a good relationship with the Dalenwald household. On top of Chris's affection, the count himself treated us kindly.

"Birds will tire of flying eventually. Don't you need a safe perch to rest on? I would be happy to serve as your perch." Chris looked into my eyes again.

I floundered, at a loss. It would be easy to say yes now; at this rate, Mimi and I would receive landowner rights, and we could have a home on a planet if we so chose. Elma herself was a noble, so she already had the

right. I didn't know how they treated machine intelligence like Mei, but I couldn't imagine it was unnatural for a first-class imperial citizen to have a Maidroid at his side. As for the twins… Well, I couldn't say much about them yet.

"Uhh… I'll definitely consider it," I managed to say.

"How indecisive," Princess Luciada sighed.

"Princess, this is too big for me to decide on my own; I think it would be more thoughtless to answer now without consulting Mimi and Elma first. Show me a little mercy, okay?"

I'd thought of building a base somewhere once I had the right, and I'd considered Count Dalenwald's territory as a candidate. But I would owe him a lot if I leaned on him now, and depending on how the conversation panned out, it was possible that he'd demand I marry Chris as a condition.

That wouldn't be a bad end to the journey, but I wasn't planning on finishing my travels quite yet. I still wanted to explore space, make money, try lots of things, and see lots of sights. Mimi hadn't yet fulfilled her wish to try every space cuisine out there, and I still hadn't found the soda of my dreams. Heck, even Elma had yet to pay off her debt to me…not that I cared about that anymore.

"Hmm… That is fair. My apologies, you two."

"I-it's okay, you don't have to apologize." Mimi was flustered by the princess saying sorry to *her*.

"Don't worry about it, please. But it seems like Hiro and Christina's story resonated with you, did it not it, Princess?" Elma asked curiously.

"Of course. It's like a holo-novel, isn't it? An uncle who covets a noble title robs her of her parents, but after a long journey through space, she's saved by a mercenary just before space pirates have her in their clutches. Then, he protects her and avenges her parents. But how could it all end in unrequited love?"

"Princess, I don't think the story is over yet," Chris said.

"Hee hee, perhaps not. Wouldn't it be a lovely ending if the two, reunited in the capital, finally reached their happy ending after surviving a noble's plot?" Princess Luciada smiled and indulged herself in fantasy.

But it was then that Mimi had to object. “Mrgh… Princess, I’ll have you know that I lost my parents and was saved by the same mercenary before I could fall into the depths of despair. Now, I’m finding happiness with him.”

“And you have the added twist that you look just like the imperial princess.” Elma sided with Mimi.

Okay, this is my chance to change the subject. I have to jump at this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

“Nice try, Elma. You’re a noble girl who, inspired by a novel modeled after Celestia, decided to follow in her footsteps in search of freedom. You’re the one living a life like a holo-novel.”

“But then I screwed up and ended on *your* ship.”

“That’s just part two!”

“Hmmm… Mimi and Elma’s stories would make for interesting holo-novels or movies… But Hiro is at the center of all of them.”

“He is…special, in many ways.”

“That Dr. Shouko we met in the Arein System seemed to have her eye on him, too. Heck, Tina and Wiska love the guy.”

I felt four pairs of eyes boring into me—hell, five pairs, since Mei was waiting off to the side.

“…A womanizer,” Luciada said decisively. *Huge disagree.*
I disagree, so please stop looking at me like that.

“That’s Master Hiro for you.” *Mimi, don’t just give up on me! Please don’t.*

“He’s got a way of attracting people with odd circumstances,” Elma added. *Can you stop talking about me like I’m just some troublemaker? It really feels like that lately, and it’s not funny.*

“Then that means our meeting was special, too!” *Chris, you’re too optimistic! Though I guess you could call it fate that Chris’s cold sleep pod ended up recovered by pirates in the vast expanse of space,* and *that it was fully intact after we destroyed their ship.*

“Now, uh, how about we go loosen up a bit with the royal knights?”

“You’re going after Isolde this time?”

“Master Hiro…”

“You’re gonna end up on a pike at some point.”

“Things won’t end well if you try that on a royal knight.”

That’s not what I’m saying! I just want to get out of here!

***

Naturally, Chris couldn’t stay at the imperial palace for days on end. However, the princess and I were now able to have a conversation without holding back—and she was extremely interested in my history with women.

“Today, I’d like you to tell me about this Dr. Shouko woman.”

“Please give me a break.”

Nothing even happened between us! I kind of felt a hint of a spark, but the memory of what happened to me is far too strong! However, I folded before the princess’s assault and spilled the beans. *Man, I wish someone would do something about this.*

Thus, another day passed. Finally, it was time for the space dogfight portion of the tournament. This would be a mock battle using real ships. Laser cannons and shields had reduced output for the contest, and ammunition was replaced with mock battle ammo—though that was still strong enough to blow any unarmored human to smithereens. On top of that, we ran a damage monitoring program, and the referee’s ship was running multiple simultaneous appraisal programs. The referee for the day was an Imperial Fleet ship that wasn’t participating in the tournament, and the venue was an Imperial Fleet training sector.

“Master Hiro, how will people other than mercenaries participate in this round?”

“I can imagine Imperial Fleet captains joining in, but there might be others. Elma, do you know anything?”

“Mobile knights might join in, too,” Elma added.

“Mobile knights?”

Now that’s a cool title. Do they ride in humanoid robots or something? There wasn’t anything like that in Stella Online*, so if they do exist, I want one.*

“They’re skilled mercenaries who are invited by nobles to become knights. Their descendants may continue to serve the family as mobile knights. A lot of descendants of mobile knights end up on the Imperial Fleet’s carrier-based craft.”

“Oh. So they *don’t* get in giant humanoid robots?”

“Not in this empire, at least. The sword supremacists in the fleet have been trying to get their ships outfitted with anti-ship blades, but the cost and maintenance are too much for the fleet to bother adopting them.”

“But you’re saying those *are* a thing?”

I’m getting excited now. So the problem is that the maintenance and upkeep are too steep even for the Imperial Fleet. If they didn’t adopt it, I’m sure they must’ve had a good reason.

“Are these mobile knight people strong?” Mimi asked.

“Are they?” I tried mimicking her in a cutesy voice.

“Imitating Mimi isn’t cute, so cut it out,” Elma said, rolling her eyes. “As for how strong they are, there are all kinds. Some of them even still use the old ships they inherited.”

“So you think *some* of them will be strong, then?”

“Of course. Some of them are as skilled as gold-rank mercenaries. Mobile knights must maintain the peace in their lord’s territory, after all, and that means fending off space pirates. They could be members or even leaders of their lord’s private army…though some of them are pretty crappy.”

“But it means they’ll have lots of practical experience,” Mimi noted.

“More than the Imperial Fleet, in some cases.”

Okay, so I’d better not underestimate these mobile knights. If they’re backed by nobles, then they must have good equipment, too. Though I doubt I’ll have to worry about the ones using inherited ships.

In the end, no matter how skilled you were, you were at a serious disadvantage if your ship was old or ill-equipped. Though, of course, having a good ship but lacking skills meant that you'd lose because you couldn't make the most of the ship.

"The Imperial Fleet has what they call ace pilots, too; they're seriously skilled. Pilots who have earned that title have tons of experience, so if you underestimate them, they'll trip you right up."

"Got it. And mercs too, huh?"

"Those are probably the ones you want to be the most careful against. If they're gold rank or higher, then they'll also be experienced, on top of having powerful ships."

"Yeah."

Space pirates didn't come near the capital, though, which meant that there were fewer mercs around. The ones who were here were probably on guard duty for merchants who'd come to buy goods produced in the capital. Unlike lone wolf types like me, they typically specialized in fighting in teams.

That meant that most of them weren't especially strong at this kind of one-on-one dogfighting. By my reckoning, the mercenaries in this area wouldn't stand a chance against me. Though…there might be some skilled mercs who came here for other business, like I did.

"Anyway, let's just relax. If we do our normal thing, we'll naturally see results."

"That's right!"

"Fair. I'm not really worried about it."

Chapter 10:
Dogfight

"ONE AND ALL, the day has finally come! The tournament has reached its final stage: dogfights between ships! In these mock battles, laser cannons and shield power will be decreased, and ammunition will be replaced with training rounds. What do you think?"

"Despite the decreased output, any of these weapons would obliterate a person instantly on contact, so it remains a dangerous event. Furthermore, as shield output has been reduced as well, any crash would be disastrous. Imperial Fleet rescue ships are standing by, however, so never fear. Just enjoy the awe-inspiring battle as it unfolds."

Today's analyst was a woman. *Could it be the lieutenant commander—or, well, I believe she's a lieutenant colonel now?* I'd thought at first glance that it might be *Lieutenant Colonel* Serena, but it was a different person entirely. Though, given her uniform, she seemed to be from the fleet as well.

"I suppose Captain Hiro remains the contestant to keep an eye on today?"

"That's right. He has already shown his prowess in the earlier stages. According to our intelligence, however, dogfights are his true forte. I can only wonder what sort of battle we will bear witness to today."

Man, I can really feel the pressure now. Not that I don't plan on living up to their expectations, of course.

"Now for our first bout of the tournament. This will be a match between Captain Rex, gold ranker and member of the mercenary group Arrow of Light, versus Second Lieutenant Nielsen of the Imperial Fleet's 28th Defensive Force."

"The mercenary group Arrow of Light—"

The analyst began introducing the contestants. The mercenary group called Arrow of Light mainly did bodyguard work for merchant convoys, and this Rex guy was kind of like their captain, with the most kills of all of

them. Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Nielsen was an Imperial Fleet soldier who piloted a carrier-based craft. He was apparently an ace pilot who had downed many enemies in the battle with the neighboring Belbellum Federation.

"What do you think?" Mimi asked me.

"Hmm. I won't be able to say much until the battle begins, but based on their ships alone, Rex seems like the one to watch."

That Rex merc's ship was basically like a high-speed missile platform. Those ships toyed with enemies using their swiftness, then fired seeker missiles when the time was ripe. And if they used their ample generator output to attack, they could even fight at close range. You couldn't let your guard down around those things.

Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Nielsen's ship was a standard carrier-based craft from the Imperial Fleet. No quirks, simple controls, nothing it excelled or failed at. It was a multi-role fighter with lasers, multi-cannons, and seeker missile pods. Despite being a very average ship, it was most definitely a military one; each component was a step above those your average mercenaries used. Depending on his skill, Nielsen could be an extremely tough opponent.

"It all rides on Nielsen's skill," Elma added.

"Agreed. Though I think he would be the easier one to go up against."

"It would be awful to be pelted with seeker missiles…" Mimi agreed.

"Exactly."

Seeker missile saturation attacks were pretty frightening. The *Krishna* could shake them off with its maneuverability, but I wouldn't want to have my attacking and evasive capabilities limited in the meantime. Flares and chaff could cover you to an extent, but the enemy would know that and devise a strategy around it.

"Ho ho, that's a gold-rank for you! Not bad."

"Yep."

The battle was progressing in gold-rank mercenary Rex's favor. His long-ranged seeker missile saturation attacks were cornering his helpless

opponent. Nielsen was using his flares and other diversions well, but he couldn't make an effective counterattack.

"Will the mercenary win this one?" Mimi asked me.

"If he can press this attack, yeah."

Rex used his seeker missiles cleverly. Instead of aiming them directly, he would place them in the direction his enemy was moving ahead of time, activating them with a delayed timing to help him corner Nielsen. However, all loadouts that mainly relied on missiles had one particular weakness.

"He got away."

"Yup."

Rex had Nielsen on the ropes for a while, but his missile volley finally ended. Nielsen's ship was damaged, so Rex probably meant to finish him off with lasers. However, Nielsen flipped right onto the offensive. The two ships flew at each other rapidly, and rays of light tore through the blackness of space.

"Thoughts, Hiro?"

"I'd go for a close-quarters battle before I ran out of missiles. That probably means he has missiles to spare, right?"

"For sure."

Immediately on the heels of my assessment, the two ships crossed paths once more, and there was an explosion. It seemed I was right about Rex still keeping seeker missiles in reserve. He must've used the momentum of their charge to fire them off at point-blank range.

But the battle wasn't over just yet.

"That's a military-grade ship for you. It's not down even after that," I mused.

"That thing is tough."

The intense dogfight raged on, but this time, Rex was in a tight spot without his missiles. Nielsen gradually cornered him and finally shot him down.

“In the end, the reason for Rex’s defeat was his inability to press that advantage.”

“I’d say Nielsen’s calm decision-making in focusing on his own safety and baiting the enemy’s missiles was what decided it,” Elma added.

“I see… Master Hiro, how would you have fought that battle?”

“If I was up against Rex, I’d throw flares and chaffs while using flak cannons to fight off his seeker missiles, charge in, and down him before he even knew what hit him. If I was against Nielsen, I’m confident I could handle him in a straight fight. Worst case, I’d just kite him with my four heavy laser cannons and win that way.”

We discussed the fight while we awaited our turn. We were up pretty late that day, even though I hadn’t gotten a special seed this time around. *Are you sure you don’t wanna give me special treatment for my top event?* I could see that a-hole emperor smirking in my mind’s eye. *Ha ha ha, surely not. No, he totally did this on purpose. I’m certain of it.*

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The announcer and female analyst’s voices came through wide-field communications.

“Now, it’s time for the man who started it all! Captain Hiro is about to take the field!”

“I’ve had a peek at his battle data, and his maneuvers in battle frankly must be seen to be believed. I’m excited to witness this today.”

“Master Hiro, they expect a lot of us!”

“I wish they didn’t. I’m not exactly here to do stunt flying or anything.”

“Just do what you normally do, bud,” Elma said with a shrug. *Meh, she’s right. No point in worrying about it.*

“His opponent will be Sir Vizer, a mobile knight working under Count Ledran! He is normally charged with keeping the peace in the Ledran territory, so he has ample experience fighting space pirates.”

“I’ve never seen a ship like Captain Hiro’s before, but Sir Vizer’s ship is a small combat ship adopted even by the Imperial Fleet. Larger than carrier-based craft, it is equipped with a much more powerful generator. It is quite similar in quality to the combat ships used by mercenaries.”

“Interesting. Which ship would you say comes out on top in terms of specs alone?”

“Captain Hiro’s *Krishna* is a wholly unprecedented ship, so I can’t appraise it yet. However, the data shows that it seems to be an offensive ship with high maneuverability and firepower. Sir Vizer’s small ship, the Saber IV, is another high-spec ship that excels in both regards. It seems the skills of the pilots will be the deciding factor in this battle.”

“I see. Then this will be a fierce battle indeed. Let us begin the countdown!”

The countdown to the duel began. I activated weapons systems and deployed all four heavy laser cannons and two flak cannons.

“Got a strategy?” Elma asked me.

“Charge in and blow ’em away.”

The countdown ended, and I fired the *Krishna*’s thrusters at maximum power.

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Apparently not expecting my immediate all-out charge, the Saber IV’s reaction was delayed by an instant. But it really was only an instant; he promptly accelerated toward us, too. It seemed he was ready to play along with this head-on slugfest.

“His firepower isn’t bad.”

The Saber IV’s main weapons looked to be two high-output laser cannons. They were weaker than the *Krishna*’s heavy laser cannons, but they were on the stronger end of small craft equipment. Either those were military-grade goods, or they were new models from his weapons manufacturer.

“Space pirates don’t even come close,” Elma agreed.

However, when two ships charge at each other head-on, they cover the distance between them in the blink of an eye. We fired our laser cannons at each other as we closed in, but *just* before I was in flak range, the Saber IV changed course and backed off. This guy must have looked into my loadout.

“Seems like someone’s scared of my flak cannons.”

“As he should be.”

“That makes things easier for us, though.”

Since he’d changed directions, I patiently followed. Flak cannons could be instantly fatal to enemies who didn’t know about them, but even if they *did* know, they were extremely helpful in getting you behind an enemy like this.

Battles between ships without shield technology would end in one missile or a few shots of flak, but that wasn’t true when the ships had thick shields. It became a game of neutralizing the other side’s shield and dealing damage to the ship itself.

Normally, you would slowly deplete their shields with lasers, seeker missiles, and whatever else. After that, you’d be able to deal damage to the ship proper. However, some weapons could skip that process entirely and deal fatal damage to the shield and ship at once—flak cannons were one such weapon.

Their effective range was extremely short, but the shrapnel would pierce through and greatly damage shields, going on to smash into the ship’s hull. The cannons themselves apparently had a special construction to them. But their effects weakened greatly at even a moderate distance, turning their output into laughably weak shrapnel. Despite this, they were a convenient defensive option when seeker missiles and other projectiles were coming your way.

“Ha ha ha! Where are you going, friend?!”

“Master Hiro is very excited.”

“He must be in a good mood now that he gets to pilot his ship again.”

That's right. I've been locked up in the imperial palace all this time. How can I not be excited now that I can feel my ship around me again?

"Now, what are you gonna do? Keep me on your tail and I'll blast you with heavy lasers. You don't want that, do you?" I turned off the attitude control system. Sir Vizer's Saber IV, which had shown signs of preparing to turn, suddenly decelerated as if in response to my words.

That's right. You want me to overtake you, don't you?

I operated the attitude control thrusters to spin the *Krishna* vertically, allowing me to face him with the front of the ship as we overtook him and fired several rounds of flak in his face. The wave of shrapnel pierced the Saber IV, though it didn't quite fill the top of his ship with holes; instead, it struck violently, sending sparks flying.

These were training rounds, after all. If they weren't, the Saber IV would've probably blown up. The buzzer signaling the end of the match buzzed in the *Krishna*'s cockpit.

"Whoooa, what has just happened?! Captain Hiro's *Krishna* overshot the Saber IV, but just then, the Saber IV was declared downed!"

"Let me check the data—goodness…"

"Lieutenant Miroku, what just happened here?!"

"Sir Vizer's Saber IV was on the defensive from the start, leading to a one-sided battle. When Sir Vizer feigned a turn and decelerated, he was trying to make Captain Hiro's *Krishna* overtake him. That would have allowed him to get behind his opponent."

"I see. But how was the Saber IV downed?"

"Captain Hiro must have predicted the Saber IV's next move. When he passed overhead, he turned off his attitude control device and used the attitude control thrusters to manually turn the bow down, facing the Saber IV as he overtook it. He then pummeled the defenseless Saber IV with his large-bore shard cannons. Shard cannons are limited to extremely close range, but they pierce shields and deal major damage to hulls. When struck at such close range, no small ship would come out in one piece. Captain Hiro's foresight and piloting skills are godly indeed."

“Wow… Aha, we’ve received video from another angle! I see, it’s as plain as day from this angle. Such a large vessel, performing those maneuvers in space… Why, it’s like watching an acrobat. And he had the presence of mind to attack in that moment?”

Even if that flak cannon fire hadn’t finished him off, I’d still had the *Krishna* pointed at the Saber IV. With the shields greatly depleted already, all I’d have had to do was fire all four of my heavy laser cannons at once. I could have also switched to kiting mode and chased him around again if he tried to run. Either way, my victory was sealed.

What’s that? Was there any way I could’ve lost? Well, of course. I just wouldn’t normally bother explaining that, and it would be pretty damn difficult to corner me to begin with. After all, I’d built up my ship specifically to reduce the possible paths to defeat—or at least, I’d optimized it so that it would have the least chance of defeat with me specifically at the helm.

The announcer and analyst seemed to be explaining attitude control systems, but I ignored it and returned to the Imperial Fleet dock. This dock was built adjacent to the training sector where this event took place, and it was mainly used to maintain ships used in that sector. But today, it was full of the ships of participants in today’s event.

“I haven’t taken any damage, but check for me just in case. Also, refill my training flak, please,” I said to the Imperial Fleet mechanic as I sunk back into the pilot’s seat.

“Roger that,” he answered.

“Tired?” Elma asked.

“Not exactly. Just relaxing now that my first battle in a while has ended.”

“I think that’s better than being tense the whole time.”

I took a breather and drank a cold beverage from my stupidly high-tech, fixed-position drink holder.

“How many more battles until we win the finals?”

“If nothing goes awry, four more,” Mimi answered.

“Four, huh? That’s fewer than I expected.”

“There probably weren’t a lot of people and ships that could gather in the capital in just ten days,” Elma suggested. “Even with the existence of gateways, it still takes time for the word to get out.”

“Sounds about right.”

Even using gateway communication and hyperspace communication that moved even faster than ships, it took time for information to reach remote sectors. I couldn’t imagine there were many people who had the time to prepare *and* come all this way by today, even if they did hear about it.

If this event had properly been scheduled in advance, there might have been tens of times as many contestants.

After that first battle, I fought two more times.

My second opponent was an ace pilot of the Imperial Fleet, though they fought differently from Second Lieutenant Nielsen from the very first match of the day. Their ship was extremely mobile, making for an intense dogfight, but I wouldn’t lose in a close-range battle. I put them in my flak cannons’ sights and shot ’em down.

The third one was a mobile knight. This guy excelled at swift kills using six high-output laser cannons and two seeker missile pods, but unfortunately for him, he was too slow. I flew by him at full speed, turned around, and kited him to death.

Thus, we arrive at the semifinal and my fourth-round match. I was up against a gold-rank mercenary.

“A destroyer, huh?” I noted.

“That’s right. It’s the same model adopted by the fleet, too.”

Among the ships that mercenaries used, destroyers would be on the larger side. It was practically the biggest class of ship that mercs favored. Ships larger than that, like cruisers, were untenable due to maintenance cost and flight speed. They were also too big to handle well in mercenaries’ main battlefields, reef sectors filled with asteroids and space debris. As such, almost no mercenaries adopted them as their main combat ship. Obviously, things changed a little when you had a mothership like the *Black Lotus*, which was a combat mothership close in size to cruisers.

Anyway, back to the topic at hand: destroyer-class ships weren't especially suited to player-versus-player combat. They were large combat ships, so they were fast and strong, but they were too unwieldy compared to small ships. Due to their size, they had a lot of blind spots for an enemy to take advantage of if they could get in close.

This made them poor choices for combat in reef sectors where there were a lot of obstacles, so they were usually adopted by mercenaries who protected merchants and the like, since they wouldn't go into those types of environments to begin with.

"We've got an annoying one here."

"There aren't many obstacles out here, are there?" Mimi said.

The training sector where this event took place had almost nothing that qualified as an obstacle. After all, the Imperial Fleet didn't fight in reef sectors for the most part, so they had no need to train on them. So why was fighting a cruiser here such a pain? That would be because, thanks to their size, they packed a hell of a punch. They could fit a lot of cannons and they could hold a lot of ammunition. Naturally, they also had a powerful generator on board, so their shields were stronger than those of small or medium ships.

"No problem. As long as we can get in there, it's our win."

Most likely, this merc's opponents so far had all been destroyed by the ship's overwhelming power before they could get in close. High firepower, strong shields, and thick plating really were the way to go. The *Krishna* was so strong because I'd pursued these same objectives in its customization.

"What do we do?" Elma asked.

"Get right up to it. You're not even a middling fighter until you learn how to win against big ships in situations like this."

"I think the 'middling fighter' in my mind is very different from the 'middling fighter' in your mind, Master Hiro…"

"What a coincidence," Elma chuckled. "Same here."

Back in *Stella Online*, the science of destroying large ships with a small ship—some might call that "giant-killing"—was greatly valued. Of

course, there were strategies among large ship users for destroying small ships as well, but in the end, consensus settled on small ships having an advantage when two fighters of equal skill were involved.

Things changed a little when the enemy used a medium-sized ship, but that didn't matter right now.

Still, large ships had an advantage against NPCs, and they had far more space for carrying and recovering cargo. That led to a lot of players preferring them for daily use. Basically, they were more convenient as long as you weren't fighting other players. Some of them could even use self-operating carrier-based craft a lot like Funnels or Bits.

"We're up against a gold-rank, so let's stay on our toes, ladies."

I guided the *Krishna* over to starting position to get ready for the match. *Now, how are they gonna fight? I can't wait to find out.*

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"Thank you for waiting, everyone! It's the second match of the semifinals, the one you've all been waiting for: Captain Hiro is here! His opponent is a fellow mercenary, Captain Schneider! Captain Schneider pilots a ship adopted by the Imperial Fleet, the Cavalry VII! His ship's name is the *Dominator*!"

"Up until now, Captain Schneider has pushed the Cavalry VII's overwhelming strength and defensive ability to the forefront in order to fell his opponents. How will Captain Hiro handle this? Will even his techniques fail in the face of such raw power? I'm dying to find out."

While we waited at the starting point, the wide-field channel lit up with the voices of the announcer and analyst.

"Master Hiro, we've received a communication request from our opponent."

"Huh? Wonder what he wants. Answer it for me."

"Yes, sir." Mimi accepted the communication request and connected us to our opponent, Captain Schneider.

“This is Captain Hiro from the *Krishna*,” I greeted him. “Whatcha want? We’re about to fight.”

“Schneider here. Hey, I just wanted to say hi to my opponent.” Captain Schneider gazed directly into my face. *What’s this guy’s deal? Kinda rude to just stare like that.*

He looked younger than I’d expected. He was probably older than me, but he didn’t look middle-aged yet. His hair was long and a light brown like Mimi’s, which complemented his pretty-boy features. His eyes, however, looked just a little too sharp.

“Hmm? I thought you might’ve just been some uppity kid, but that’s not how you look at all. I suppose this’ll be a tough battle,” he mused.

“It’s an honor to hear that. But I’m just a lucky… Hell, an *unlucky* newbie. How about you try underestimating me a little more?”

“A real lucky newbie would do his best to make himself look better.” Captain Schneider’s lips curled up just slightly into a ferocious grin. “Can your blade reach my *Dominator*? I’m excited to know the answer. Schneider out.” He hung up, and his window disappeared from the cockpit’s display.

“Think he’ll be tough, Hiro?”

“Seems like it to me. We’d better not let our guard down.”

While Elma and I were talking, Mimi’s eyes were sparkling for some reason. *What’s gotten into her?*

“That conversation was so cool! It was just like one of the holo-novels Princess Luciada let me read!”

“Oh… Yeah.”

What the heck is that princess making Mimi read? Seriously, don’t influence my poor, innocent girl. It probably wasn’t anything too spicy…but maybe I’d better keep an eye out in the future.

“Elma, I’m counting on you.”

“You mean in this fight? Or do you mean watching Mimi?”

“Both.”

“I’m not her mother, y’know…”

“You’re old eno—ow, ow! Okay, sorry!” I quickly surrendered when Elma pinched my thigh. Maybe the fact that we could banter and relax even in the face of battle was proof of our team’s bond.

“Both fighters have taken their positions. It’s time to start the countdown!”

A large countdown clock appeared onscreen.

“What’s the plan?”

“We go in hard at the start. After that, we adapt to the situation. But basically, we want to be in his blind spot. Mimi, when the battle starts, scan his ship and mark where his main modules are.”

“Understood!”

As soon as the countdown ended, I fired the *Krishna*’s thrusters at maximum power to close in on the *Dominator*. Meanwhile, the *Dominator* pointed its upper front at us—and therefore most of its cannons—and fired off its anti-aircraft cannons like a hedgehog throwing up its spines. *Isn’t it weird that they still call it anti-aircraft even in space?*

“Deploying chaff and ECM.” Elma did so, greatly reducing the accuracy of the anti-aircraft fire coming at us.

This chaff was entirely unlike the kind used on Earth. Chaff as I knew it back there was basically just tossing out aluminum and other metal foil in order to trick radar, but the type used in this universe was much more advanced. The effect of it was kind of like making electronic shadow clones that messed with enemy targeting systems.

Its effect was limited, but at least for a short time, it greatly reduced the accuracy of enemy auto-targeting systems. The technology was more advanced, but the concept was the same. That was why it was still called chaff to this day.

“Man, that’s a thick hail of bullets,” I mused.

Even when we concealed our ship to try to reduce the number of bullets that could hit us, our shields were being cut to ribbons. The *Dominator* was backing off while pointing its upper front toward us, keeping him out of our range. It seemed like his plan was to just keep battering away.

“Okay, here goes. Be ready to deploy shield cells at any time.”

“Roger.”

I raised the *Krishna*’s bow and charged toward the upper front of the *Dominator*. Of course, he didn’t want me going overhead and circling around him, so he raised his own bow to follow. In other words, the *Dominator* was beginning to tilt upward.

“Containment, containment…” I rolled my own ship to point at the *Dominator*, firing all four heavy lasers to hold it in place. My weapons were unbelievably powerful for a small ship, but I was always going to be at a disadvantage in a head-on shootout. While the *Krishna* did have strong shields and plating, it was still a small craft. A larger ship was just more durable.

“We’re losing at this rate, y’know.”

“Just a little longer… Now!”

Once the *Dominator* had built up enough rotation speed, I pulled on the controls again and shot in a zigzag path toward the larger craft. I was aiming for its bow.

The *Dominator* turned its upper front to follow us again as we charged overhead, but it was impossible for such a behemoth to change direction fast enough to keep up with these sudden moves.

“Made it!”

The *Krishna* shot out of the hellish anti-aircraft fire, grazed the *Dominator*’s bow, and slipped below it. Of course, there were some weapons ready to fight us off on the underside, but they were nothing compared to the previous barrage. I showered the cannons in flak to shut them down.

“Let’s keep this up!”

Remember those vital internal modules I’d had Mimi scan for ahead of time? Now that we knew the location of the thrusters’ energy source and ammunition chambers, I shot flak at them. I also fired the heavy laser cannons to exhaust my opponent’s shields, focusing my attacks on where the generator would be. Eventually, the end-of-battle buzzer sounded, and

our victory was announced. It seemed the system had registered that as a destroyed generator.

"The battle is over! Captain Hiro has successfully felled the goliath before him! Incredible. I thought Captain Schneider had this in the bag!"

"It was the zigzagging motion that Captain Hiro performed. Ships as large as cruisers struggle to keep up with such quick turns. However, it takes real guts to try a strategy like that in a one-on-one battle. It means charging straight into anti-aircraft fire, after all; one misstep would have meant defeat."

"Interesting…"

I listened to the announcer and analyst as I returned to the fleet's dock.

"See? That's all it takes," I told the girls.

"I was frightened the whole time…"

"Yeah. We had to use three shield cells… Hey, why didn't you use anti-ship torpedoes?" Elma's question was quite reasonable.

"It's not like I went easy on him; I just fought like I normally do. You don't need to waste one of those bad boys on a single large ship." If there were other ships around and I didn't have time to waste on the *Dominator*, I'd clean it right up with an anti-ship reactive torpedo. But the *Dominator* alone wasn't worth it. "I mean, those things are expensive."

"But we're using training ammo here. It doesn't cost money, does it?"

"All the more reason. I'm not going to die if I lose, so why take the easy and flashy way out? Besides, we'd already checked the Cavalry VII's module distribution and resistance to attacks."

"You're stoic at the weirdest times, Hiro." For some reason, I sensed Elma shooting an annoyed glance at me. *Hey, I didn't do anything wrong. What's the deal? Again, I didn't even go easy on him, let alone do anything mean.*

"A-anyway, we made it to the finals! The finals!" Mimi piped up.

"That's right. Let's end this headache fast; we've wasted enough time on this song and dance, and we have a mountain of things we need to settle

in the capital."

We had to go to the Dalenwald mansion to see Chris, and we were planning to leverage Serena's connections to buy some high-spec battle bots in the capital. Also, we would probably receive a bunch of requests from the media. All our plans being delayed was, naturally, thanks to a certain POS emperor. *Bastard.*

But no matter what, our next step was maintenance and resupply.

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Maintenance, resupplying, and the third-place match took a while, so in the meantime, we had a light meal on board the *Krishna* and researched our finals opponent.

"Platinum rank, huh? I thought they didn't give those out willy-nilly?" I asked.

"There were three active in the empire; you're the fourth. One of them either happened to be near the capital or was close enough to use a gateway. It's not like it's impossible."

"It is very like Master Hiro to have luck this bad."

"I think it's the combination of all of our destinies, not just mine!" I wanted to totally refute the idea that I was the sole troublemaker there. They rolled their eyes at me, but I felt like they had bad fortune, too.

"Anyway, look; here's what they did in the semi-finals," Elma said, and began playing a video on the holo-display.

"That's a pretty souped-up ship… The base looks like a Wolf-type."

"Wolf-type?"

"It's a combat ship manufactured by Steppenship Industries. The frame is probably a Beta Wolf, stripped of its command gear and customized. For a medium-sized ship, it's light and agile. There aren't many hardpoints for equipping weapons compared to other medium ships, but thanks to the cargo space, it's easy to fill it with plenty of strong weapons.

And since it's a medium ship, its generator output and shield capacity are greater than those of a small one."

"…It sounds strong."

"It is. It hasn't got enough speed and mobility for my tastes, but it's fast and tough, and it has strong weapons. I bet there are a lot of people who prefer it."

The problem, I would quickly discover, was the weapons this merc had on board. A green light projectile fired from the modded Beta Wolf and struck their opponent, downing it in one hit.

"Ack!" I made a weird noise the moment I witnessed it.

"This looks like trouble…" Elma mused. "If it can hit us, anyway."

"Wh-what was that weapon?" Mimi asked.

"A plasma cannon… Ugh, my most hated type of weapon."

Plasma cannons were seriously powerful weapons. They had long range, but their shots moved slowly. In exchange for only being able to hit what was right in front of you, they did extremely high damage. They were a piercing kind of weapon that went straight through shields and plating alike, damaging the ship directly.

Since Mimi didn't know what they were, I decided to explain to her. In a way, they were like flak cannons with higher power, lower speed, and much longer range. The *Krishna*'s defenses relied on shields and plating, so it was extremely weak to piercing weapons like that. I mean, it was just a small ship, after all. Just so you know, the full list of piercing weapons would be flak cannons (or "shard cannons," as some people called them), railguns like the one on the *Black Lotus*, plasma cannons like the one our enemy wielded, weapons that pierced shields like anti-ship torpedoes and missiles, and anti-ship ramming horns and blades. Basically, anyway. I couldn't speak to any newly developed or special weapons.

"I see… But you can dodge it, can't you, Master Hiro?"

"If they shoot it normally, then yeah, I think that'll be easy. But listen, Mimi. People who use weirdo weapons like those have strategies to *make* them hit; they never miss the perfect moment to fire. A guy who

equipped that weapon, became a platinum-rank mercenary, *and* made it to the finals here isn't the kind of guy to rely on lucky shots."

"That's oddly persuasive, coming from a guy who uses shard cannons to the fullest," Elma said thoughtfully.

"Flak cannons always hit if you can just get close. They're not weirdo weapons at all." *Hey, don't look at me like that. Haven't you two been a little too unfair with me lately?*

"I'll just leave that remark alone. Anyway, we need to watch out for the plasma cannon."

"I don't like how you said that, but yeah. Chaff and ECM won't work on point-blank weapons like that, so we have to stay alert at all times."

Electronic warfare weapons that interfered with targeting systems didn't work on weapons that just fired straight forward rather than auto-targeting. That was true of the *Krishna*'s flak cannons, too, though our heavy lasers were affected by such interference.

"By the way, what is the guy himself like?" I asked.

"Umm, it says his name is Captain Banks," Mimi replied.

"Silent Banks…" Elma repeated his name. "He's a famous mercenary."

"Whoa, sounds strong."

That sounded like the name of a person who'd walk onto a pirate ship and kill everyone on it with ease, all while calling himself a cook.

"Well, every platinum-rank merc out there is unique in their own way…" Elma glanced at me.

Me? Unique? Guess I can't deny that. But really, if there's anything unique about me, it would be that I have two beauties named Mimi and Elma at my side! That's gotta be it. My uniqueness is not mine alone, surely.

"Silent Banks. Sometimes, people call him Masque du Banks. He's a quiet guy, and whenever he meets people face-to-face he always keeps his mask on. He even uses his handheld terminal to communicate instead of speaking. Definitely among the stranger mercenaries."

"But he's skilled," I said.

“Yes, that should be a given. I’m looking at his battle records now, and his ship’s kill count is staggering.”

“Which means he’s got a lot of experience. That’s a pain.”

Looks like this one won’t be an easy victory.

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“This marks the final battle of this impromptu tournament! On one side, we have Captain Hiro, who has continued to show his stuff throughout the tournament! Opposing him is, miraculously, another platinum-rank mercenary: Captain ‘Silent’ Banks!”

“A duel between platinum rankers. This is a rare sight, certainly an event you won’t experience every day! Expectations are rising for a bout between those at the apex of mercenary skill, those who fight space pirates and beasts on the daily.”

While we waited at our starting position, we listened to the announcer and analyst and focused our minds for the coming battle…

“Win or lose, all this racket will finally be over. That’s a relief,” I mused.

…Or not. Nope, we were going back to everyday chill mode, I was declaring it now.

“It’s hard to relax while staying in the palace…” Mimi agreed. “Though it’s a shame we won’t get to have tea parties with Princess Luciada anymore.”

“You two sure hit it off,” Elma said. “Hiro, are you sad you won’t get to see Isolde anymore?”

“Seriously, we are *not* like that.”

“I know.” Elma giggled. *Tease me all you want, but how about you focus on something a little less scandalous?*

You get it. Sitting there all tense and serious just didn’t suit us. Losing against a fellow platinum ranker wouldn’t really ding my reputation, and it wouldn’t kill us, either. This was casual stuff.

“All preparations are complete! Now, it is time for the final match of the dogfighting portion of the tournament to begin! Start the countdown!”

The countdown to the final battle ticked down. No matter what, this was the last one; I was going to throw in everything I had. Might as well win it all in a blaze of glory.

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As soon as the battle began, I deployed my bottom weapons bay and fired an anti-ship reactive torpedo. The torpedo slid along on inertia for a while until, as planned, it stopped in place.

“Huh?” Elma looked at me, surprised by my unusual move here.

I ignored her quizzical look and called out, “Focus. Mimi, mark that one and every torpedo I lay down from this point on via the radar.”

“O-okay!”

Banks’s black Beta Wolf, apparently called *Shadow Wolf*, fired its main thrusters to close the distance between us. It seemed like he wanted to engage us from a short to medium distance so he could make full use of his plasma cannon.

“Like hell I’ll let you do that.”

I used the *Krishna*’s reverse thrusters to maneuver away from him. His weapons were two plasma cannons, two seeker missile pods, and three high-output laser cannons. Though his ship had few hard points compared to others of its size, every one held a powerful weapon. Even so, only his seeker missile pods and laser cannons could contend with the *Krishna* at long range. I only had four heavy laser cannons, but if I could deal with his seeker missiles, I would be at an advantage in the DPS race. The question was whether my ship was sturdy enough to keep up…

“What do you think, Elma?”

“I think we’d lose in a battle of attrition.”

“Got it. Well, we just need to buy time.”

I fired a second torpedo, changed the direction of my ship, and gunned it at full speed to circle around to the *Shadow Wolf*'s side. Compared to turning up or down, spaceships had a harder time reacting to left and right turns. They were made so that if you wanted to turn left or right, you might as well just roll the ship and adjust your aim by raising the front up or down.

Of course, Banks and *Shadow Wolf* did just that, aiming his bow perfectly at my ship—and I mean *perfectly* at us.

"He's firing his plasma cannon!"

"Whoops."

At Mimi's warning, I swiftly took evasive maneuvers. An orb of green light tore through the patch of space where we'd just been. It was a perfectly aimed shot. We threw chaff, but his high-powered lasers still grazed the *Krishna*. We really couldn't let our guard down around this guy.

While evading another plasma cannon shot—which also came with terrifying accuracy—I fired a third torpedo and stood by.

Apparently growing impatient, Elma demanded, "Hey, what exactly are you doing here?"

"It's all preparation. Now we just have to make the finishing touches. We're about to do some intense maneuvering, so get ready."

I turned the *Krishna* sharply again, this time closing in on the *Shadow Wolf*. Approaching him would make him more likely to strike with his plasma cannons, but it also made it easier to get out of his firing range. Basically, if we were close enough that we wouldn't be able to evade, we'd just have to stay away from his bow. And of course, I had flak, so he would be under great pressure as well. Taking the *Krishna*'s flak at close range would be devastating.

"Whoooa! It's become a super-close-range dogfight!"

The announcer's irritating voice came through wide-field comms. Banks really was a skilled pilot; he kept tight control over his ship's inertia, precisely escaped our aim by accelerating and decelerating, and even aimed at us in the process. His plasma cannon fire flew right by the *Krishna*. Of

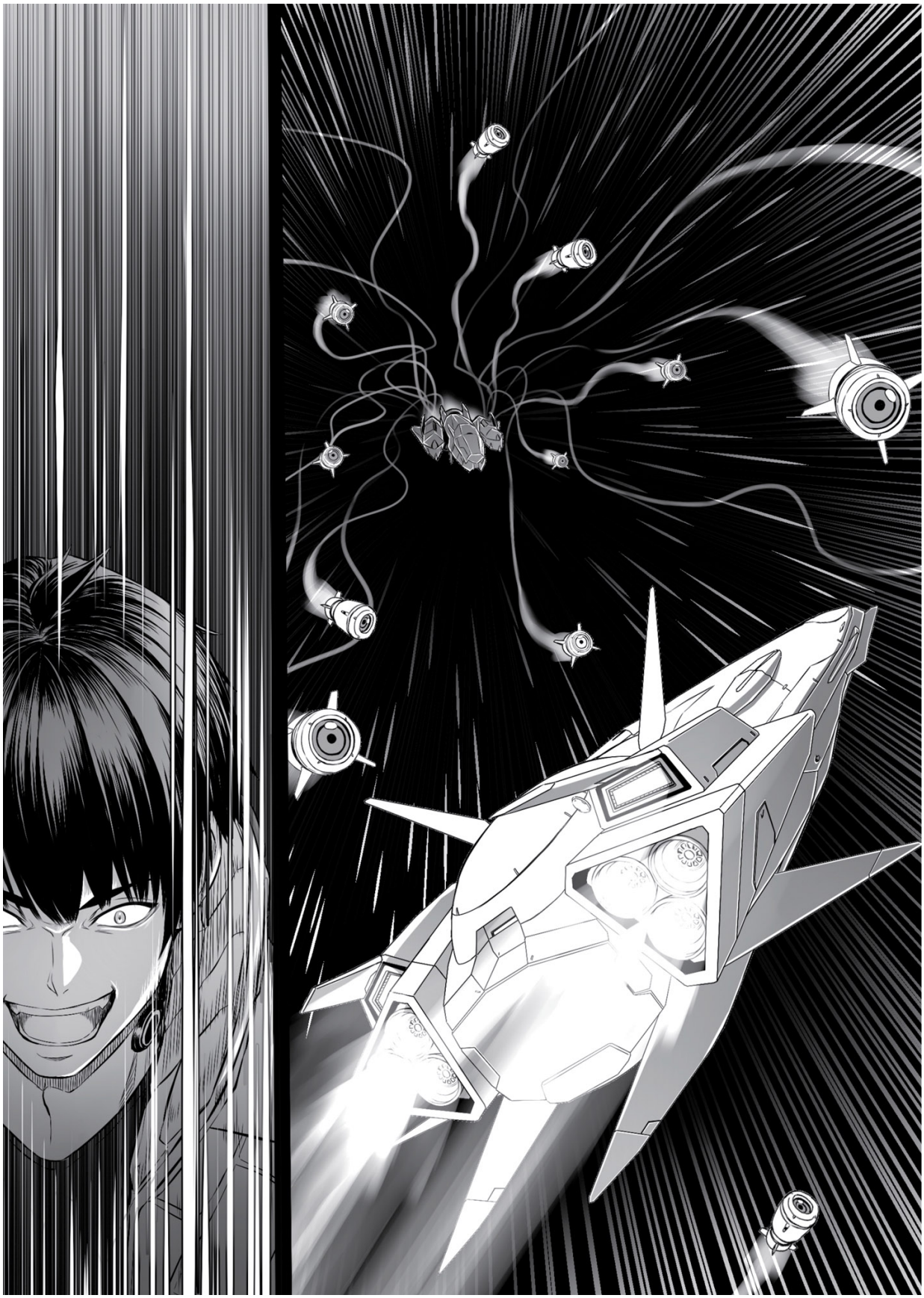
course, I wasn't going to make it easy for him to hit me. At such close range, maneuverability was king.

"Seekers!"

"Tch!"

Banks apparently decided he had a disadvantage at this range, so the *Shadow Wolf* began firing off countless seeker missiles despite the risk of being caught in the blast. No matter how tough the *Krishna*'s shields were, we'd be done for if we got caught up in those explosions.

I gladly fled the scene. Using everything, even my afterburners, I single-mindedly ran from the *Shadow Wolf* at maximum speed. Naturally, Banks tried to follow. He was probably grinning to himself at the sight of the defenseless *Krishna* from behind, but his confidence would prove fatal.



“That’s checkmate.” I tapped my pilot console and three huge explosions went off around the *Shadow Wolf* as it fired a plasma cannon. They were the anti-ship reactive torpedoes I’d laid down ahead of time. The nearest one downed the *Shadow Wolf*, and a buzzer signaled the end of the match.

“Goodness, what just happened?!”

“These must be…the anti-ship reactive torpedoes Captain Hiro fired. It seems their intense dogfight brought them close to the third one he’d launched. While it’s hard to believe, it seems Captain Hiro used the scuffle to draw Captain Banks close to a torpedo. He waited for an opportunity and then detonated it… I’m amazed that was even possible.”

The female soldier analyzed the situation and shuddered in awe. The set-and-forget torpedo strategy was really just a noob-killer move that only worked in one-on-one battles. Once your trick was exposed, it wouldn’t work a second time; your opponent would just rush you down.

While the analyst yammered on, we received a single message via short-field communications: *You defeated me spectacularly. It won’t happen again.*

The sender was Banks’s *Shadow Wolf*.

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“The valiant spirit you displayed in taking the top spot in all three rounds of the tournament was magnificent to behold. I bestow my praise upon you.”

“I am honored to receive it.”

We were in the audience chamber, a place where the Grakkan Emperor met with and spoke to his subjects.

After our battle with Captain Banks, a royal knight ship had led us to the imperial palace. When we landed, we were politely dragged—ah, *guided*—through being dressed up and taken to His Majesty. It was apparently okay for the media to be here, as our audience with the emperor

and his praise for our valiance were being livestreamed to the entire empire. Though it was hard to call it a "live" stream given the amount of time it took information to pass through the galaxy, which meant it would probably take a few days to a week for the stream to achieve a wide reach.

"As your first reward, you and your ship's crew will receive the status of first-class imperial citizens. Furthermore, your ship will be granted the right to use all gateways in the empire as you see fit. May it aid in your mercenary work."

"We graciously accept."

First-class citizen rights were pretty great, but I *really* liked having free access to gateways. That would totally open up the area in which I could work.

"You will also receive 50,000,000 Ener as prize money. Consider this a personal gift from me to you for having demonstrated your skills in the tournament. I will not take no for an answer."

"We graciously accept." I bowed my head.

That "personal" part probably meant it was a form of apology for throwing us to the wolves for his own entertainment. Of course, His Majesty had also put in some effort to keep Mimi from being targeted by any predators, so I wasn't that bothered—*Okay, actually, no. This guy totally prioritized using us for entertainment. But he paid us out, so I'll call it water under the bridge. I'm a mature guy, after all.*

The top dog of a space empire wouldn't exactly go around bowing his head in apology. Heck, I wouldn't want him to. At all. If he did, it would probably end up being a huge deal because I'd "wounded his imperial authority," or whatever. So he expressed his goodwill with something easy to understand: money. Was there anything that could manifest goodwill like cold, hard cash, especially 50,000,000 Ener of it? Though I'd bet some of that money included an implicit request to take care of Mimi. He *was* her relative.

"Very good. I look forward to seeing you continue to apply yourselves." The emperor nodded in satisfaction and exited the audience chamber. With this ceremony complete, we were finally free.

Chapter 11:
The Princess's Day Out

GOOD GRIEF. Finally, I can say goodbye to the imperial palace.

At least, you'd think so, right? I sure did.

"Good day to you, Captain Hiro."

"Good day…" I sighed. The next day, as we were trying to bid adieu to the imperial palace, Princess Luciada visited the guest room we'd stayed in. *I was seriously about to get out of here. What could she possibly want?* "Umm, Princess—er… Luciada, we were just planning to leave."

Luciada narrowed her eyes reproachfully at my distancing politeness, so I tried to be a little more familiar. She looked satisfied then, but the royal knight behind her glared coldly at me. *What do you want me to do?!*

"I find that rather heartless. I've just gotten to know Mimi and Elma, and this might just be the last time we ever see each other."

"Uh… Well, now that the tournament is over, we don't really have any reason to stay. And it wouldn't be right for us to eat up public funds without good reason, would it?"

"I don't want to hear your logic." Princess Luciada crossed her arms and turned her face aside. *Yeah, she's trouble. Cute, but as troublesome as can be. Was she just hiding this willful side of her before?*

"Umm… Look, I can tell that you're displeased. I really do understand. But what do you want us to do?"

"I'm so glad you asked. What if you allowed me to accompany you in your mercenary work?"

"Please don't be absurd."

"That is pretty absurd…" Elma agreed.

"We can't do that." Even Mimi backed me up.

Princess Luciada puffed up her cheeks in frustration at our three-pronged denial. *No matter how cutely you pout at us, no means no. Don't be*

ridiculous, please. I bet that bastard of an emperor would totally agree to it, too, because it "sounds fun" or something. And wouldn't the crown prince, your literal father, be outraged? Though I hear he's not in the capital at present.

"Please," I begged again. "The knights behind you look ready to put their swords against my neck at any moment, so I'd really appreciate if you could cool it."

"Isn't this the part where you're supposed to break through the palace's defenses to aid me on my journey to freedom?"

"What you're saying is deeply troubling! Your demands are too much, and I have no reason to do any of it! Help me please, royal knights!"

Yet they flagrantly ignored my desperate pleas. *Girls, don't you hear your charge making these ludicrous demands? At least advise her against it! Don't you have any sense of loyalty?!*

"Why are you asking my knights for help?!" Luciada cried.

"What do you expect?! I'm terrified that the literal princess of this empire is about to get me locked up for treason or something!"

"Excuse me?" Mimi cut in between the princess and me. "Princess, are you saying that you would like to leave the palace?"

"That's right. I'm finally an adult and able to be seen in public, so I'd like to take this opportunity to see the outside world," Princess Luciada said firmly. *Sure sounds to me like she wants us to help her run away. But if I'm supposed to sneak her out, then that's clearly crossing the line into ridiculous.*

"I see… Well, this is just an idea, but maybe you could dress up as me and walk around town in secret?" Mimi suggested.

A look of understanding came over Princess Luciada's face. Mimi really was the spitting image of her, to the point that it was basically miraculous how similar they looked. But even if they looked like twins, that didn't mean nobody would question it if she walked around town.

"This is more dangerous than I thought," I muttered.

"Huh?"

The empire had many enemies. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that someone might kidnap Mimi and use her for propaganda. *Maybe I'd better keep an even closer eye on her from now on.*

"Nothing, sorry. So, what are you going to do?"

"Well, I think it's an intriguing idea. Richelle?"

"Yes, Princess. Right away." The knight beside her—Richelle, apparently—looked off in a seemingly random direction. I wondered what she was doing…maybe contacting someone. I'd heard you could have cybernetic implants put in your brain that would give you special abilities. Maybe she was some kind of robocop…or roboknight, I guess. "His Majesty has given his permission. However, Miss Mimi must remain within the imperial palace."

"We can't have people seeing two Mimis at once, yeah…" I agreed.

That said, we couldn't just leave Mimi here alone. I doubted the empire would choose this of all times to make a move against me, but it would be a lie to say I wasn't worried just a little. Who knew what might happen to Mimi if I left her undefended in such an advanced universe? Like, what if someone brainwashed her? While I didn't want to be overly suspicious, I still couldn't put my full faith in the empire. So I made a decision. "Mei, stay here and guard Mimi."

"Understood. You may entrust her to me." Knowing Mei, she knew what I was thinking. I could leave everything to her without worry.

"What should I do?" Elma asked.

"You know the capital, right? I'd say it'll look most natural if you come with us," I answered. Elma promptly agreed. *Yeah, this is definitely the best way. Ideally, we would have Mei with us as well, but I just don't feel right about leaving Mimi alone.*

"Yep. Okay, so me, Hiro, and Mimi—or the princess disguised as her, anyway. We three will go together."

"How wonderful. I'm getting so excited!" Princess Luciada chirped eagerly. But when she looked over at Mimi, her expression suddenly turned serious. Mimi was in her usual mercenary gear, which left her shoulders and

thighs pretty exposed. Also, the design showed kind of a lot of cleavage. “Umm, so… Does this mean I’ll be wearing the same clothes as Mimi?”

“If you wanna impersonate her, then yeah.”

“You can’t exactly go in a ball gown…”

Princess Luciada flushed beet red and squealed, “I-I have to wear that shameless clothing?!”

“Shameless?!” Mimi cried, stunned by the princess’s reaction. *Hey, it’s a bit revealing, but it’s going a little far to call it shameless!*

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“I-isn’t there anything we can do about this?” Princess Luciada, having donned Mimi’s clothing, pulled down on the hem of her top. Her face was bright red. *Mmm, now that’s a sight for sore eyes.*

“I’m afraid not,” Mimi said flatly, hiding her rage behind a smile.

“You two really do look like twins now that you’re in her clothes.”

“For sure.”

In the end, Mimi relented and allowed Luciada to add black shorts. She covered her shoulders and décolletage with a jacket. *Yeah, now Mimi’s revealing clothes look a lot more normal.*

“All that’s left is your hairstyle,” Mimi said. “Let’s do pigtails to round out the look.”

“I wouldn’t mind cutting my hair to match yours…”

“It’s so pretty and long, though! It would be a waste to cut it.”

Mimi tied Luciada’s hair up in pigtails using ribbons like the one she was wearing. *Nice. She’s even wearing the same ribbons; nobody would be able to distinguish them at a distance. Up close, our crew and her regular guards probably wouldn’t mistake them, but I doubt anyone else could tell. And the farther away you get, the more alike they look.*

Princess Luciada was almost ready, so I put on my jacket and prepared to leave. Though really, all I had to do was place my handheld terminal in my pocket. My weapons had all been taken when I entered the palace, so I'd need to have them returned when we left, but I'd do that on my way out.

"So, where are we sneaking off to?" I asked.

"Hmm… Well, I'd prefer to follow Princess Luciada's lead." Elma looked over at the princess, who was still having her hair fussed over by Mimi.

Luciada cocked her head in response. "I'm afraid I don't know what kinds of things we might find, or where, so there isn't much for me to lead you to. But I would assume the under-levels are more fun than the surface?"

"Uh… Well, I dunno if *fun* is the right word…" Elma looked up at the ceiling in thought. Going by the name alone, they were probably disordered or even squalid places. No doubt Elma was wondering whether it would be right to take the princess somewhere like that.

"I don't know much about the surface and under-levels, myself, so I'm interested to hear about them," I said.

"Well… The thing is, I haven't been to the deepest depths of the under-levels, and I left five years ago, so my impressions might be out of date."

"That's fine; just tell us what you know. I'm sure Princess Luciada would like to know, too." I shot a glance at Luciada, and she nodded in response.

"The surface is basically a city for nobles," Elma began. "For better or worse, it's all refined. You should assume it isn't a place for common mercs like us to hang out. But I'm sure Princess Luciada would be welcome anywhere on the surface."

"That would defeat the point. But I'm sure Captain Hiro—erm, *Master Hiro*—would be fine?" Realizing that she was supposed to be imitating Mimi, Princess Luciada corrected herself. This made all of her knights twitch. *Hey, it's not my fault! Don't act like you wanna kill me!*

“I’m not sure,” Elma answered. “He may be treated as an honorary viscount now thanks to his Gold Star, but I don’t recommend he try to shoulder his way into high society. Most of all, the surface is all really expensive. It is for nobles, after all.”

“I see…” said Luciada. “By the way, Elma, you can talk to me as frankly as you do everyone else. I’ll be Mimi for the day, after all, and I assume you aren’t this reserved with her?”

“…I’ll see what I can do.” Elma’s cheek twitched. She was a true-born Grakkan Empire citizen, after all. And her father was with Imperial Family Affairs. Even after she ran away, her loyalty to the imperial family remained. It was a pretty tall order to tell her to not be deferential—let alone to be outright casual—with a princess of the empire.

“So, what about the under-levels?” I prompted.

“Even though they’re all called the under-levels, they do have a lot of regional differences. Typically, the closer you are to the surface the safer it is, and the goods and services are higher quality than those below. As you go lower, it gets more dangerous.”

“Just more dangerous?”

“Well, you could say it has its good sides and bad… While things are less safe the deeper you go, that also means that the authorities are paying less attention down there. More *stimulating* goods and services, especially ones that are usually regulated, are plentiful down there. I’ve never been very deep, though, so I haven’t seen it with my own eyes. Kind of weird, but the middle layers are actually the most dangerous; as you get to the very bottom, it gets safer.”

“Why is that?”

Elma answered Mimi’s question. “The very bottom is an agricultural district right on the planet’s crust. Imperial safety watchdogs keep a careful eye out there. But there are a lot of places they can’t supervise closely in those cramped, tangled middle layers.”

I get it. So the top and bottom are safe, but the places farthest from both extremes are where it gets dicey.

“Okay. For reference, what exactly are these ‘stimulating’ goods and services provided in the middle layers?” Luciada asked.

“I have never personally witnessed—ahem… I’ve never seen them myself, but illegal cybernetics and biotechnology are apparently common there.”

“Do you have any particular examples?”

Battered with the princess’s questions, Elma sighed and resigned herself to explain. “From what I’ve heard, they have stuff like immersive VR machines with the limiters taken off for sexual experiences, services using illegal implants, services provided by illegal clones using DNA from idols and such, techno drugs and chemical drugs, and other stuff like that. There are also back-alley cybernetics and biotech doctors who’ll install stuff straight into your body.”

“Sexual experiences, illegal services…”

“I won’t offer any opinions on that kind of business, but let’s say the sex stuff is the *least* concerning of what they’re doing down there.”

That’s the least of it? If you put it that way, it sounds pretty scary.

“If people dabbling in that kind of business are running the place, I can see why it’s dangerous,” I agreed. “But the levels closer to the surface aren’t as bad, right?”

“Right. So if we’re going to see the under-levels, I think we should stay near the surface. Maybe…three levels down, at most?”

“No reason to take unnecessary risks. Let’s make that two.”

I looked over at Princess Luciada for approval. After a moment’s thought, she gave her assent. “I am curious about these experiences, *stimulating* and otherwise, but one mustn’t be too demanding.”

“You don’t have to be interested in them… I’d bet any detailed knowledge would just gross you out without offering much benefit, anyway.”

“Really? If you say so, Master Hiro, I will accept that as truth.”

She was surprisingly obedient. Maybe she would be less of a handful than I’d thought. I did feel bad for leaving Mimi out, but I’d use this

opportunity to get in some good capital under-level sightseeing.

"Take me next time, okay?" Mimi said.

"I promise. You too, Mei."

"Yes. I look forward to it."

I wish I could bring Tina and Wiska too. But if it's only a matter of annoying paperwork, I'm sure Mei can take care of it just fine. We'll find a way.

"Well, shall we be off?" Luciada asked.

"Yeah, I guess… Should we really be your only guards, though?" I looked to the royal knights, who all nodded in unison.

"Worry not."

"We will do what we can."

"I…see." *In other words, they'll be there in the shadows to protect her?* "How much should we rely on you? Or to be more direct, how cautious should we be?"

"Please remain at maximum caution, just as you normally do for Mimi."

"Wow. I'm surprised you could tell." That was an easy order to follow: just keep an eye on Mimi—or Luciada, rather—like I always had.

"Okay, let's get going. Do you have a route planned, Elma?" I asked.

"More or less. It seems like I can go the same way I used to."

"All right. Let's do this, then. Mimi, wait patiently for us. Mei, take good care of her."

"Okay. Be careful and have fun!"

"Yes. Leave it to me."

***

We left Mimi and Mei at the imperial palace, had our gear returned to us, and left—well, we attempted to leave.

“Hey, hey, hey! What the hell is that?” I cried.

“Um… This would be my sword?” *Why do you ask?* Princess Luciada seemed to say with her eyes as she held a sword that was as long as she was tall. It might as well have been called a greatsword! Serena had an impressive sword on her hip, but Princess Luciada’s was even bigger.

“Mimi doesn’t know how to fight with a sword. Besides, how are you supposed to carry a thing like that around? It’s enormous; it’s bound to stand out.”

“Well, you carry a special scabbard across your back…”

“Denied, denied. If you’re going to imitate Mimi, then that would absolutely ruin the disguise.” After having a royal knight bring Mimi’s gun belt and laser gun, I forced Luciada to equip them. “Just take these. Otherwise, this whole disguise is a waste of time.”

“I’m supposed to protect myself with this toy?”

“We’re not visiting a battlefield, so this is enough. Normal people can’t evade laser gun death beams.”

“If I’m up against an augmented noble, this won’t be enough to protect myself…”

“We don’t plan to go up against any nobles.”

“Then at least allow me to take this.” Princess Luciada produced a dagger with a blade about twenty centimeters long. *I guess at least that one is small enough to fit in her jacket.*

“I doubt you’ll get the chance to use it, but sure. That can come. But keep it hidden in your jacket, got it?”

“Understood.” Princess Luciada breathed a sigh of relief and strapped her dagger on. It was made to attach to some kind of specialized harness on the right side of her torso. Like a real cloak-and-dagger sort of thing. *Wait, that’s not what that means? Oh.*

If you must know, I was carrying my usual laser gun along with two swords, while Elma just had her laser gun. That Princess Luciada and I carried swords was unusual; normally, just a laser gun like Elma or Mimi had was enough for self-defense.

After all that, we finally departed from the imperial palace. Luciada's guards had said that they would protect us in secret, and indeed, there were no signs that we were being followed.

"I'll take you the way I remember," Elma said.

"Okay! This is my first time leaving the palace!"

"Seems like they have everything you could ever need in here…" I mumbled as I looked around.

There was a high-speed transport system in this palace, after all; it had trains, stations, and everything. I had to wonder if there was even some kind of shopping district. *No, no. They wouldn't bother simulating shopping; they would just have all their necessary goods sent to some kind of hub and then distribute them from there, right?* The quantity of consumable goods this palace used every day must have been huge, so maybe they had some way of importing what they needed.

"Anyway, try not to say stuff like that out there. Remember, you're *Mimi*, not Princess Luciada."

"It'd be Mimi's first time walking around the capital, too, so you'll be fine as long as you don't mention it being your first time leaving the palace," Elma added.

"Understood. I'll be careful."

The train came while we were talking, so the three of us boarded. A few other people working in the palace were riding on this train as well.

"What's our route?" I asked Elma.

"We get off in four stations and switch to the Shibonetsuka Line. We'll be there in no time."

"Got it. Mind sending me the route info, too?"

"Okay."

"And Mimi… Wait, where's your handheld terminal?"

"I don't have one—umm, I mean… I-I lost it?" Luciada stammered.

"Oh… Okay, we'll have to start by buying you one, Mimi." Handheld terminals were like more advanced smartphones. They could make calls, send messages, search for info, make payments, act as identification, and

even start up your spaceship. In other words, you kind of couldn't live without one.

"Do you have your ID? Or…do you even have one in the first place?"

"Oh, yes." Princess Luciada produced something like a fancy-looking commuter pass wallet and showed it to me. *Yeah, that's definitely her ID. This would cause a huge ruckus if she just whipped it out, right?*

"Let's find a shop that won't cause problems if you pull that thing out," Elma suggested.

"Yeah."

A shop run by machine intelligence would do the trick. They prioritized compliance with privacy laws, after all, so they wouldn't run around telling people the princess had visited.

"We always rely on Mimi for stuff like this, huh?" I chuckled.

"Yep. She does kinda help us out a lot."

"Shush, you two."

"Whoops! You're right."

"Mimi" was right in front of us, so our conversation was unnatural. We'd have to be really careful here.

***

We arrived at the last palace station, changed to the Shibonetsuka Line, passed by a few more stations, and finally arrived in the under-levels at Myonsk Station.

"Stations as big as this one have elevators for going down."

"I see."

"Wow… What an incredible view."

The view of the under-levels from the elevator was really something. Below all the structures covering the surface was a normal planet blanketed

in eternal night. Illuminated by electric lights and neon, it was like a sleepless city at all times. It kind of reminded me of being on a colony, in a way.

"You can think of the first under-level as something like a busy street area, or maybe an entertainment district," Elma explained.

"Really? But it's close to the surface, so it must serve classy clientele, right?"

"That's right. There are a lot of nicer shops that aren't *too* pretentious, and there are others for both commoners and wealthy customers, too. Service quality is also high, so if you have money, this is the place to spend it."

"What is the second under-level like, then?" Luciada asked.

"They provide services for common people. They also have residential areas for the more affluent citizens, like those working on the first under-level and the surface."

"And what of the third level?" Princess Luciada bombarded Elma with questions about the under-levels. I also listened with rapt interest, so the other people in the elevator with us probably thought of me and the Mimi-disguised princess as first-time visitors to the capital.

The elevator stopped, and the three of us got off on the first under-level together.

"How about we start with a place that sells terminals?" I suggested.

"Sure. This way," Elma directed us.

"Apologies for the trouble," murmured Luciada. "You may invoice us for the expense later."

"This is no big deal. It's fine." This was more or less pocket change to me, and filing an expense claim honestly sounded like more trouble than it was worth. Or maybe I could ask Mei or Mimi to do it? I decided to keep receipts, or at least a list of expenses, regardless. "But if it's gonna cause trouble if I don't, I guess I might as well file a claim."

"Please do."

Not long after, we arrived at a terminal shop a short walk from the elevator. We succeeded in getting Princess Luciada a handheld information terminal without any issues. The female-coded android working the counter *did* seem to freeze up for a moment when she received the ID…but maybe that was just me imagining things.

"You probably know this, but make sure you protect her customer info carefully, okay?" I asked.

"We are quite aware." She flashed a pleasant smile, but if she had a perspiration function, I bet she'd have been drenched in cold sweat by that point.

"Wooow…" Having just received her first handheld terminal ever, Princess Luciada was extremely pleased.

"Hey, you can mess around with your terminal when you're cozied up at home. Smartphone zombies are dangerous."

"Smartphone zombies?"

"I'm saying it's dangerous to use your terminal while you're walking; it distracts you. Oh, hand it over for a sec."

"Okay?" Princess Luciada obediently handed over her terminal, and I transferred 10,000 Ener from my terminal's balance to hers with a few taps. "Umm…?"

"For now, I've put enough money on your terminal so you can try basically anything as long as you don't go absolutely insane. Remember how I paid when we were on the train? From this point on, you'll be paying your own way."

"Okay. So you've given me enough to go shopping too?"

"That's right. By the way, that amount is a few months' worth of a common person's salary."

Hearing that, Luciada went wide-eyed and blinked a few times. "I don't quite understand. But am I to presume that is a *large* amount?"

"It's not exactly the kind of money you hand over like pocket change," Elma said.

“Don’t worry too much about the number. It just might come in handy, is all.” I brushed off their gazes with a shrug. To be honest, there were a lot of problems in this universe that could be instantly solved with the right amount of money. If Luciada happened to get separated from us, 10,000 Ener ought to be enough to get her out of whatever trouble she was in and return her to the palace. “Now, we’ve got what we needed… What should we do next?”

“Wanna eat?” Elma suggested. “It’s about lunchtime.”

“Lunch? I would love something hot and fresh!” The princess’s eyes sparkled in anticipation. That look on her face was so much like Mimi.

“I’ve heard stories about royalty and high-class nobles only eating cold food because people have to test for poison,” I said. “Do you actually do that? That can’t be necessary in this day and age, right?”

“You are correct. I’ve heard that such a thing was common in the past, but modern kitchens are equipped with scanners that can instantly detect poison—whether it’s when it’s brought into the kitchen, during cooking, after cooking, or even just before eating.”

“But you prefer hot food, huh?”

“Yes. Also, I’d like to have something I can eat with my hands so I can break the rules for once!”

“If you want junk food, then the second level is the way to go,” Elma said. “The first one is all fancy stuff for nobles.”

“Then let’s hurry to the second level!”

“You don’t wanna look around here first?”

“While I *am* interested, I believe I would like to prioritize the junk food of the second level.”

The princess had ordered it, so we did a one-eighty and headed back to the elevator to continue down to the second under-level.

“This elevator only goes down to the second level?” I asked.

“You need to use a different one to go lower. There are elevators that go up and down all floors, but they’re pretty far from here.”

“It still feels inefficient that they made it stop here…”

“It’s by design. They want to segregate us from the people of the third level and lower.”

“Oh… Like social stratification, literally?”

“Pretty much.” Elma explained, “The first and second under-levels are called the high-level floors; they’re the stomping grounds of most successful commonfolk in the imperial capital. Though really, there’s still a world of difference between the first and second levels.”

“I see… So even the capital is distorted in this way,” Princess Luciada mused.

“Distorted…? I think that’s just how things normally work.”
I shrugged. It was great to strive for an ideal world where everyone could live without class or borders, but if you asked me whether that was possible, I’d be pretty dubious. Humans aren’t inherently uniform beings; for better or for worse, we all have our own unique quirks. Maybe if everyone had the same physical features and existed as a shared consciousness with shared direction, it wouldn’t be impossible.

“I see…”

“I’m surprised you’re interested in that stuff.”

Since we had some free time during the elevator trip down, I expounded on my theories. Princess Luciada appeared to be convinced, while Elma seemed exasperated. Elma’s reaction was a little rude, but I couldn’t complain; she knew that I wasn’t much of a scholar.

“It’s not like I’m thinking about it 24-7. It’s just my narrow-minded world view, so take it with a grain of salt.”

“Don’t worry. I like hearing opposing views,” Luciada replied.

Before we knew it, we’d arrived at the second level.

“Ooh. I think I could settle right in with the atmosphere here,” I said, taking in the sights.

“Yeah. It feels like one of the safer trading colonies, doesn’t it?”

The area around the elevator was bustling with activity. Elma had nailed it—it was reminiscent of a busy trading colony. Most large colonies that didn’t use a lighting system to replicate a night sky were like this.

Despite the inherent darkness of being underground, it was brightly lit by streetlights, lamps, shops' neon signs, and more. Still, it was more subdued than the first level, which had been beyond dazzling.

"Okay, I don't know this place at all. What's the plan?"

"It's not like I know it either," Elma shrugged. "I basically never came to the under-levels when I was a kid."

"Okay, then how about we just stroll around? C'mere, Mimi."

"Yes?" Princess Luciada cocked her head at my outstretched hand.

"You'll be in trouble if we get separated, so hold my hand."

"Huh? Ah… O-okay." She took my hand timidly, so I took hers in a firm grasp and began walking. We could *not* lose her; it would be a whole huge thing if we did. Heads would roll—mine, in particular. "Sh-shouldn't Elma hold hands with us, too?"

"Elma can take care of herself."

"H-hmm…"

I'd half-expected her to protest that she wasn't a child and could take care of herself; the fact that she didn't showed that Princess Luciada was a wise one. Most people have trouble seeing things from an unbiased perspective, and they can't accept that they'll sometimes cause trouble or hold others back.

"Food sounds good, but how about we get drinks first?" Elma pointed at a nearby booth.

"Yeah, why not? I'm pretty thirsty."

"What kind of drinks do they sell?"

There were a few customers milling around the stall, though not enough to form a line. It must've been a reasonably popular booth. At least, nobody seemed to be having any negative reactions to the drinks they served, so it surely couldn't be that bad.

"Weeelcome. What would you like?" asked the shopkeeper. He was a lizard person whose voice came out in a long hiss. One of those reptilian types, I guess. This might've been my first time speaking with one face-to-face.

“What do you recommend?” I asked.

“Humansss tend to like the Sssoy Protein Ssshake.”

“The name doesn’t tell me much. Is it good?”

“It isss. And it’sss full of nutrientsss.”

“Then we’ll take three. Also, do you know any places around with good food? Nothing fancy—we just wanna fill our stomachs.”

“I do. By the way, I have sssomething that you can mixxx into thisss to make it tassstier.”

“Okay, okay. We’ll take three of those, too.”

“Thank you. Put it in sssoy milk or sssynth milk to make it good.”

I bought drinks and mysterious packaged powder from the reptilian shopkeeper, and he recommended a place to eat. The soy milk here was the same as the kind I knew, but synth milk was basically artificial milk synthesized through chemistry. Real milk obtained from livestock was an extremely expensive commodity in this universe, so most of the milk available anywhere was either soy or synth.

“Soy protein shakes, huh?” Elma raised an eyebrow.

“Let’s just drink ’em and see how they are.”

“Okay!”

The three of us took an experimental sip. The drink bottles came with thicker straws than usual, and there was something more than liquid inside… *Whoa, what?*

“They put tapioca pearls in this stuff?” I asked.

“Tapioca?”

“They’re little balls of starch. Though I guess I don’t know if this is literally tapioca or not.”

Tapioca was made from the starch of a root called cassava, so if the base of whatever was in this drink wasn’t cassava, it couldn’t *technically* be called tapioca. That was just me splitting hairs, though; this was totally a boba drink. These were popular in my old universe, but what about the here

and now? Fads like that tended to be trendy for a while before disappearing off the face of the planet.

"They're fun to chew!" Luciada chirped.

"Yeah," Elma agreed. "They're, like, smooth and chewy. And it tastes better than I expected."

"It tastes like soybean flour," I mused. "So it's a soy milk drink with boba, huh?"

It did taste pretty cheap, but the soy flavor worked its magic well, so it was still good. They didn't skimp on the sweetener, either. They apparently made this stuff at the booth, but where did they get the ingredients from? Food in the Grakkan Empire was mostly synthesized via food cartridges or shipped out in retort pouches or cans, so I didn't think ingredients for these drinks would be plentiful—unless maybe they used the same ingredients that were used in food cartridges?

I didn't know if food cartridges used soybeans, but they packed a lot of plant protein, so soy was probably cultivated widely enough for such a thing to be possible. Starch was a good organic macromolecular compound, too, with lots of industrial uses in addition to food, so I had to assume they cultivated it here. Maybe combining that with the right products or materials was what led to this boba soy drink.

As we tossed our empty drink bottles into a trash bin, Princess Luciada and Elma shared their reviews.

"That was tasty. I've never tried something like that before."

"It wasn't as bad as I expected. Seems like a good post-workout drink."

It seemed like the drinks were a hit.

"So, should we go to that restaurant he recommended?" I suggested.

"Sure!"

"All right. Wanna hold hands with me this time?" Elma offered her hand to Luciada.

"Mmgh. I feel like I'm a child again."

“It’s dangerous in places with a lot of people,” I warned. “Hang on to your gun and terminal so nobody can steal them from you.”

“You too, Hiro.”

“I will.”

Although, given how openly I carried my swords, the people there mostly avoided us. I was wearing my usual clothes with the swords added in, so I might not have looked the part of a real noble, but people still kept their distance. The citizens of the capital really had “sword = noble” drilled into their brains, probably because they knew that messing with a noble could end up with them getting sliced in half. Now that I thought about it, the guy at the drink booth probably hadn’t seen the swords since he was behind a counter. He might’ve panicked when he saw them as I walked away, though.

As we made our way to the restaurant recommended by the reptilian, Princess Luciada abruptly asked an incomprehensible question: “Have you not found anyone yet?”

“Sorry, what?”

“When you walk around these places, don’t you usually tend to find some girl being abducted or end up attacked by a strange monster, leading to a thrilling chain of dangerous events?”

“Can you stop acting like I’m just a trouble singularity? See how you like it when you’re given no time to mentally recover from being in constant danger. Also, stop *saying* stuff like that; every time someone does that lately, it’s like a jinx—”

But before I could even finish, multiple figures stepped out to block our path. The leader—that is, the one standing in the middle wearing an evil grin—was a man who looked like a noble. He had two burly-looking men on either side of him. They weren’t just burly, either; artificial chrome bodies bestowed via the intervention of cybernetics made them even more intimidating. They’d flatten me in no time in a brawl.

“Apologize,” I muttered, looking up to the sky in surrender.

“Umm…I’m sorry,” Princess Luciada apologized sincerely.

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When he saw our exchange, the noble with the nasty smile suddenly piped up in irritation, “Hey! What could possibly be so important as to be worthy of ignoring me?!”

“Man, who cares? Who even are you?”

The man, clearly a noble from the way he dressed, was obviously displeased by my response. He had naturally pleasing features, but given his snobby attitude, I couldn’t imagine he was a popular figure. Add in the dark circles beneath his eyes and the gauntness of his cheeks… Yeah, this guy did not look healthy at all.

“Well, aren’t you a rude fellow. It’s good manners to introduce yourself before demanding someone else’s name.”

“Funny you should say that. Isn’t it rude to stand in people’s way and sneer at them?”

“How dare you!” the well-dressed man roared, red-faced. *Why do guys like him always have such bad tempers? They say people with low self-esteem are quicker to anger; that must be it.*

“Hey now, calm down. I hear people can get angry due to vitamin D deficiency too. Try eating some mushrooms, fish, or eggs.”

“*You’re* the one making me angry! Are you trying to taunt me? *Me* of all people?!”

“Okay, but really…who are you? You keep acting like I’m supposed to know.”

“My name is Alexander d’Elzar, and I am the second son of Marquis d’Elzar!” The red-faced noble, Alexander d’Elzar, thrust a finger at me and shouted, “Remember the name well, commoner!”

D’Elzar. D’Elzar, huh? That kinda sounds familiar, I thought to myself as I looked over at Elma. She was massaging her temples, as if trying to stave off a headache. She let out a deep sigh.

Ah, right. D’Elzar is the guy who Elma used to be engaged to. Loves women, can’t restrain himself, and uses his noble authority to do whatever

the hell he wants. Basically a spoiled noble brat. So this guy was Elma's betrothed, was he?

"I see. So, Alexander the Great d'Elzar, what do you want with us?"

"Oh? You demanded my name, yet you still refuse to divulge yours?"

"Nah. Why should I? You know who I am. That's why you're here blocking my path and picking a fight."

"…*Hmph*. Pointless to expect manners from a commoner, I suppose." Alexander averted his eyes and grinned smugly to himself.

I won't refute that. How did he track us, anyway? There's no way he could've eavesdropped on us in the palace. Did he just watch the door until we left? If so, he's a real model stalker.

"I have a feeling I know why…but how about you explain what you're after here? We were just on our way to grab a bite, so I'd prefer you let us pass."

"How dare you speak to me like that, you common filth? Don't you find your tones disrespectful?"

"I have no reason to respect someone who doesn't respect me," I replied. "Besides, if you wanna talk about nobility, then I should have the status of an honorary viscount thanks to my Gold Star. Which one of us do you think has higher status, O great second son of a marquis?"

I turned to look at Elma.

She obligingly explained: "Even if it's just honorary, you can't deny that someone who won't even succeed to the title of marquis is inferior in standing to a viscount."

The disguised princess added, "Conventionally, the head of a noble household is always of greater status than any other noble's child until they have taken their parent's title."

They'd both backed up my claim that *I* wasn't the inferior one here. But Alexander just flashed a self-satisfied, derisive grin and made a show of shrugging his shoulders. "Honorary titles are but a way to deceive the common rabble. Once a commoner, always a commoner. The idea of someone without blue blood running in his veins calling himself a noble is laughable."

“You’re quite bold to say that before me, you know,” Mimi—or Princess Luciada, rather—said with a sweet smile.

She’s actually ticked off, right? Luciada herself had decorated me with my Gold Star during the award ceremony. By slighting the shiny award on my chest, this nincompoop had essentially slighted the princess herself. Taking it a little further, that was almost equal to slighting the imperial family.

“Uhh… No idea what she’s talking about,” I said, trying to divert his attention.

“*Mimi*, calm down,” Elma urged her.

“Hee hee… I’m quite calm. Now, second son of d’Elzar, for what purpose do you commit this outrage against Master Hiro?”

Alexander reeled back, apparently intimidated by the imperial aura oozing from her smile. However, even when he was overcome by her force of will, he managed to force a smug smile onto his face as he spoke. “You said your name was Mimi? I invite you to be my personal maid. I’ll treat you well despite your status as a commoner. Be honored. I’ll be taking Miss Elma with me, as well. She’s my betrothed, after all.” He punctuated that declaration with a full-power smarmy grin.

“What is this guy going on about?” I asked, exasperated.

“Are you insane? Our engagement was formally annulled long ago!” Elma said. She looked like she’d begun to doubt his sanity.

“Brandishing your noble authority for such a charade, right before my eyes…” Princess Luciada began emitting waves of rage. I mean, *waves* is obviously figurative, but she was insanely intimidating even with a smile on her face.

“Anyway, that’s not gonna work,” Elma said. “Hiro and Mimi have already put in the paperwork, so they’re married. She’s the spouse of a noble, honorary or otherwise, so you can’t just use your authority to snatch her.”

“Yeah, yeah—huh?” I asked. “Marriage paperwork? Spouse? This is the first I’ve heard of this!”

“I figured this might happen, so I had Mei take care of it. Looks like I was right,” Elma said with her usual shrug. *Hey—isn’t it a little odd to do that without our consent? I mean, there’s something clearly off there, right?*

When Elma revealed this shocking truth, Alexander flipped his lid again. “Do not ignore me!”

“Would you shut up?” I yelled. “We’re in the middle of something. No matter what, no means no. Just give up, go home, take a shit, and sleep.”

“Silence! Do not defy me, commoner! Get him!”

“Whoa, seriously?”

At Alexander’s command, the cybernetically enhanced henchmen stepped forward. *It’s basically suicidal doing this in broad daylight, isn’t it? How crazy can you be? There are plenty of people around us who’ve witnessed the whole thing.*

“Buddy, are you serious? If you’re gonna start a fight, I’ll be forced to protect myself.”

“Ha ha ha! A commoner could never stand up to us!”

“Well, I think I proved my abilities during the tourna—” Before I could finish my sentence, one of the hulking men charged at me. *So the other’s going for Elma and Luciada? Ugh, what a pain.* “All right, but I warned you.”

I grabbed my laser gun with my right hand and fired off several rounds, stopping the one who was charging at Elma and Luciada in his tracks. With my left, I whipped out a sword in a reverse grip and slashed at the man coming my way.

The sudden outbreak of fighting made the onlookers who’d gathered to watch the spectacle scream and run. It was harder to fight with rubberneckers around, so I appreciated their departure.

“I’ll hold this one off!” Elma called out, whipping out her laser gun to shoot at the charging enemy. Princess Luciada had her right hand in her jacket as she surveyed the situation, probably ready to use her hidden dagger at a moment’s notice.

“Okay, I’ll be right there—whoops.” The large man lunging at me moved with surprising speed for his size. He reached out to grab me, so I

swung my sword, but he quickly yanked his hand back to avoid losing the limb. It seemed he knew just how sharp these swords could be. “You leave me no choice. I’ll try not to kill you, but don’t blame me for whatever else happens.”

I shoved my laser gun back into its holster and whipped out my other sword. In response, the big man’s arms deployed blades that made him look like a praying mantis. *Ooh, hidden weapon arms. The little boy in me is going wild right now.*

We lunged at the same time, about to cross blades. But I had zero interest in actually going head-to-head with him; I quickly held my breath to slow the flow of time.

“Nngh?!”

To him, it looked as though I had suddenly sped up. In that single instant, I sliced off both praying mantis arms at the elbow. Then I used my momentum to pass by him and close in on the one attacking Elma.

“Kh!”

“Haah!”

Noticing my approach, the other flunky also deployed praying mantis arms to block my slash. In the next moment, lasers struck his shoulders, creating small explosions that made his giant form stagger back.

“You won’t call me a coward for that, right?” Elma joked.

Elma’s lasers had thrown him off balance, and she continued to fire, mercilessly blowing away parts of his body and bringing him to the ground. Even the biggest man with the greatest cybernetic augmentations couldn’t take *that* many near-fatal high-output lasers and still remain standing.

Now, all that’s left is Alexander. I turned my eyes to where our last assailant was standing.

“Your two losers here are done. Next, it’s your turn.”

The first henchman was unable to continue because I’d cut off his arms, while the second was lying on the ground after taking a barrage of Elma’s laser blasts. Alexander was alone.

“You’re not bad for a commoner, but that’s still all you are. Know that you exist purely to submit to nobles!”

Alexander drew his sword. *Hmm? I like his energy, but his skill seems lacking.* I’d received harsh training from Mei, participated in countless sparring matches with the royal knights, and even fought famous duelists in the tournament. After so much experience, you kinda learn to estimate someone’s skill just by the way they first unsheathe their sword.

“Hey, I don’t think you wanna do this,” I warned him. “Give it up. You’re not gonna beat me.”

“How dare you make light of me!” Alexander charged, raising his sword overhead. He went straight for a diagonal downward slash. His attack was even faster than those of his flunkies; normally, it might be difficult to react to it in time.

But I’d seen this same style of swordplay hundreds, even thousands, of times. I effortlessly leaned my upper body back to evade the strike.

“I’ve got you!”

“Well, not really.”

After his first miss, he performed a lightning-fast reversal. It was almost cliché noble swordplay. *Sorry to do this while you’re so confident of your victory, but I’ve already got my sword waiting for you.*

I lifted my right-hand sword rather gently into the arc of his reversal. His wrist flew right into the edge of my blade.

“Aaaaagh?!”

The swords used by nobles—and, by extension, me—had blade edges only a molecule wide, making them theoretically the sharpest possible swords. If you wanted to cut through battleship plating, they could do it. The only things that could stand up to their edge were highly condensed metal alloys manufactured via a special process *or* other molecule-thick blades.

In other words, no matter how augmented you were, just a touch was enough to slice your hand off. And thus, as the natural consequence of his actions, Alexander’s hand went flying off, sword and all, at the speed at

which he'd swung it. Blood trailed behind his limb as the sword point stabbed into the ground, and his severed hand landed a short distance away.

"Whoa. You're bleeding less than I thought," I observed, looking down at the man curled up in pain as he held his wrist. I'd assumed blood would be spewing from the stump, but surprisingly it wasn't that bad. Maybe this was thanks to noble augmentations too?

"You…cut off my *hand*?!"

"Hey, you started it. Better than losing your life." I shrugged. Besides, nobles could probably get some regenerative treatment done. "So, now what? Do we just leave him and scram?" I asked the girls.

"That would be a bad idea. We should call the authorities and see this through to the end." Elma waved her handheld terminal at me. She was still holding her gun in her free hand, its barrel pointing straight at the fallen cyborgs.

"Then let's do that, I guess."

"I suppose we don't have much of a choice. It *is* a shame that we didn't get to enjoy our meal," Princess Luciada said woefully as she removed her dagger and sheath from her jacket. What exactly was she planning?

"Gonna finish him off or something?"

"In a way, yes." She smiled.

Cut it out, that's scary.

***

We chatted until a group of people who seemed to be the authorities came running—or, more literally, came flying. I didn't know how it worked, but they were in some kind of flying station wagons. I didn't see thrusters or anything. Were they using some kind of gravity control mechanism, or what?

As they landed and exited the vehicle, I sheathed my sword. Elma likewise returned her gun to its holster.

“Three badly wounded!”

“The medical team will be here soon.”

“Idiots! Arrest those commoners! Better yet, shoot them! They wounded my noble personage!” Alexander hollered as the newcomers performed first aid on him. I doubted they’d immediately do what he asked, but the officials were still glaring daggers at us. I might’ve had a sword at my hip, but I looked like a common mercenary. I couldn’t blame them for being suspicious.

The officials surrounded the three of us. “You’d best explain what happened here.”

For now, I’d better just tell them the facts.

“First off, my name is Captain Hiro. I’m a platinum ranker registered with the mercenary guild, and I’m an honorary viscount due to my Gold Star award. You can see my ID on the terminal in my pocket.” I patted my jacket. Elma and Mimi—Luciada, rather—gave their names as well. *Wait a second.*

“Ah… Um, is this… Really?” one of them stammered.

“I understand that you have trouble believing it, but please note the imperial family’s crest on my dagger.”

When Princess Luciada revealed her true identity to the authorities, they immediately kneeled and apologized.

“Th-there it is… Hah?! H-how impolite of us!”

“You are forgiven. For now, please do your duty. All of you.”

“Yes, Princess!”

The officials started working with one and a half times the energy compared to before. It seemed like they were being a lot more polite toward me and Elma as well. After all, you don’t want to be rude to someone in the company of royalty.

“Guess we should explain what happened.” I went over the circumstances as best I could, and Elma and Princess Luciada supplemented my story here and there.

“No! Wrong! That commoner is the one who attacked me!”

“Is that so?”

Meanwhile, despite maintaining a veneer of politeness, they were a lot colder toward Alexander now. Listening to their conversation, I picked up that there seemed to be surveillance cameras around, so they could easily check the recordings to find out who was in the right here.

“He’s saying and doing a lot of strange things,” I said. “I mean, there’s no world in which coming at us like this wouldn’t lead to trouble, right? He’s got a weird look in his eyes; I gotta wonder if he’s on drugs.”

“I see. We will certainly look into that, Your Excellency,” one official replied.

“Don’t call me that, please. It doesn’t fit me.” I grinned wryly at the overly respectful official. Now that I thought about it, my honorary title of viscount *did* belong to the high nobility, though it was one of the lower ranks in that category. It wasn’t all that strange for someone to use that term of address with me.

So, what happened in the end? We got off on legal self-defense, and Alexander and his goons were hauled away by the officials. While we were still hashing things out with the officials, royal knights appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

“Now that you’ve revealed your identity, I’m afraid you can’t sneak around anymore.”

“Please return to the palace.”

“I suppose I must,” Princess Luciada replied. Thus, our trip was cut short. “It still is *such* a shame that we missed out on the meal.”

“It sure is. I’m hungry…”

“That was the worst possible timing.”

We bundled into one of the flying station wagons and were taken straight to a large elevator and up to the surface. We then began flying toward the palace.

“Does this vehicle ever fall out of nowhere, or maybe crash due to some nefarious enemy schemes?” Luciada asked intently.

“I’d really prefer you don’t jinx us again. Or are you saying this stuff out loud in order to make it happen?”

“Oh, I would *never*.”

Hey, Princess! Why is your voice all stiff now?!

But fortunately, we made it to the palace without meeting any further trouble. I still noticed that bored look on Princess Luciada’s face, though. She really was the emperor’s granddaughter. *I can’t help but notice that fun seems to be your first priority. Consider putting yourself in my shoes, as the guy who’s suffering the most?*

Meanwhile, the emperor had apparently been meddling with Mimi. She was in our guest room, wearing a frilly princess dress and weighed down with accessories. The poor girl was stock-still and dead-eyed.

“So nothing really happened, huh?” I asked.

“Yes, I can confirm that,” Mei replied. “His Majesty simply gave her many words and gifts, mentally exhausting her.”

“Nothing we can do about that… He would’ve done the same to me,” Elma said with a sympathetic look on her face. She’d had a maid bring milk —real milk from livestock—which she was now mixing the powder from the drink booth into. It seemed like she wanted Mimi to try it. *Uh, aren’t you mixing too much powder in? Is this your first time, Elma?*

Oh, right. Apparently, cooking is a very specialized skill in this universe. I felt bad for them, so I asked the maid loaned out to our room to bring us more milk while I took the too-soy soy milk from Elma. After taste testing, I confirmed that she’d put too much powder in; I could practically feel the grit on my tongue. Mimi would choke and die if she drank this. I added more milk to dilute it. Once it was just right, Mimi took a sip, and the light returned to her eyes.

“It’s sweet…and delicious!”

“What should we do with all this soy milk now?” I scratched my head.

“I’ll take more,” Mimi offered.

“I can’t drink too much, or I’ll have a stomach ache.” I’d always been like that; I’d be in serious tummy trouble if I drank a lot of milk. It was

probably just a problem with my body, so I didn't know what I could do about it, if anything.

While I wondered what to do with our unexpected bounty of milk, Princess Luciada visited our room, once again in a dress. She must've been in a hurry to change out of Mimi's clothes.

"Oh, I see you made it right away. May I partake? Also, I will have a maid bring the clothes I borrowed from you, Mimi. Thank you for allowing me to use them."

"It's no problem. I'm glad I could help." Mimi smiled weakly. Since they were both wearing dresses, they looked like twin sisters again. Seeing them both drinking soy milk in that getup was a little surreal and funny. "Did your jaunt through the city satisfy you?"

"I think so. While I wish we could have had lunch, it was a worthwhile experience to walk through the city not as a princess, but simply as a person. I've also seen firsthand how Captain Hiro has that *spark*."

"It might be fun to watch from the sidelines, but as the guy going through it, I really would appreciate it if you calmed down a little. It is not fun."

I meant it sincerely, but Princess Luciada just giggled at me. "I look forward to witnessing your future endeavors, Captain Hiro."

I sighed, shrugged my shoulders, and replied, "Thanks, I guess…"

It seemed like Princess Luciada and the emperor would be keeping their eyes on me for a while. I wouldn't be surprised if I heard from them from time to time, so I'd have to be wary of that. Whenever that happened, no doubt it would bloom into trouble the likes of which I'd never seen.

Epilogue

THE DAY AFTER our trip to the city with Luciada, we left the imperial palace for good. We had only been allowed to stay there in the first place because of the tournament, so once that was over, we thought it'd be best to vacate ASAP.

Though, of course, Princess Luciada's selfish desires had kept us there one extra day. After we returned from the city, she chatted with Mimi all day before finally deciding that she was satisfied. We tied up some loose ends and were ready to depart at last.

First, we would have to stop by Grakius Secundus to pick up the twins. We'd been confined to the palace due to the surprise tournament, leaving them utterly neglected. Of course, we did keep in touch via our messaging app, and they weren't kids (even if they looked like it) so I was never truly worried about them.

"Anyway, once we're back on the ship, let's take it easy while we do the paperwork to land in the capital again."

"Okay!" Mimi agreed. "We promised to stop by Chris's mansion, after all, so we can't leave for good just yet."

"You might wanna work on getting those battle bots in the meantime," Elma reminded me. "That means a call to Serena."

"Right. We gotta make her keep her promises, after all."

"The media might contact us, too, so we'll have to deal with them."

"Man, that too… Guess there's no way we can get out of it this time, huh?" Given Tina and Wiska's situation, that wasn't an option. *Maaan, what a pain.*

"We've got a lot to do," Elma said. "Let's just pray everything goes smoothly, okay?"

"I dunno about that…"

"It does seem unlikely…"

“Don’t give up at the starting line…”

We all sighed in unison.

“No matter what happens, I am certain you all can overcome it,” Mei reassured us. “Just as you always have.”

“I hope you’re right, Mei.” If trouble kept piling on like this, we might eventually crack under the weight of it.

“Master Hiro, we’ve been given permission to launch!”

“All right, let’s go. Everyone ready?”

“Yes!”

“Yup.”

“Any time, Master.”

“All right, full speed ahead,” I announced. “To Grakius Secundus.”

“Okay. Setting our course now,” Mimi replied.

“Raising generator output to cruise mode,” Elma declared. “Route is clear.”

“Docking released. Moving the *Krishna* now.”

The *Krishna* floated up with the power of its attitude control thrusters. Then, the main thrusters kicked in to power its acceleration. With its nose pointed toward the stars, the *Krishna* rapidly accelerated and rose in altitude. Thanks to our inertial control system, we were surprisingly comfortable in the cockpit. It was gentler than the roller coasters back on Earth.

Finally, the *Krishna* left the planet’s atmosphere and arrived in space proper.

“I never thought I’d feel more grounded *outside* of a planet’s gravitational field…”

“Ah ha ha!” Mimi laughed. “I feel much more at ease in space than in the capital, too.”

“Same,” Elma agreed. “That just means we’re all really mercs at heart now. How about you, Mei?”

Mei blinked once, cocked her head for a moment in thought, and finally spoke. “I’m not sure. But I do know that being with you all… Yes, it calms my heart.”

“Calms your heart? Totally the same for me.”

“Agreed! Wearing a cute dress and drinking tea with the princess was fun, but this is where I really belong,” said Mimi.

“Now, shall we go home?”

“Yeah! All right, let’s fly!”

I hit the afterburners and shot off into space, leaving a trail of light behind the *Krishna*.

Afterword

THANK YOU for picking up Volume 7 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! Woo, finally, Volume 7! Hooray!

How am I doing? I'm an absolute shut-in the likes of which you've never seen…though hopefully things will have settled down a little by the time this book comes out.

As far as gaming goes, my body sought the thrill of battle, so I've been playing games where you get into giant robots that shoot lasers, missiles, and particle beams at each other. Gotta love those mechs. There's apparently an online version that's mainly player-versus-player, but I'm not sure if I'll touch that one quite yet.

Some other games I've played would be the one where you play as a mouse king who fights evil frogs, a game where you play as people infected by a zombie virus and try to gather resources for the survivors even as your zombified people die one after another, and… Oh, sorry. Basically, no matter what's happening out there, I'm always playing games.

Sometimes, you just gotta press buttons!

Now, let's leave this…thing I'm doing, where I act like I'm telling you about my life but actually advertise video games, aside. Instead, let's talk about the book.

In this volume, we reach the imperial capital. After Hiro's great exploits working for the Imperial Fleet in the last volume, he's invited to their central hub, the capital itself, to receive an incredible award. There, he learns about Elma's family and a princess who looks strikingly like Mimi.

Along the way, he's set a trial from the emperor himself. Only a half-serious one, though. While Hiro may be trembling with rage at this inconvenience, the author is overjoyed to see him suffering and demands more…! No, I'm kidding. It's totally a joke! I mean it.

This time, the bonus story is about the princess. You'll see that she's actually formidable when she's angry.

That’s enough about the story. Now, let’s get to the little details of the setting that didn’t quite make it into the novel itself. This time, let’s talk about space beasts.

Though space beasts all fit under the same umbrella, they come in different types and have different traits and behaviors. As a rule, any being that travels through space but cannot intelligently communicate is considered a space beast. Note that the ability to perform interstellar travel isn’t necessarily an essential criterion.

The crystal life-forms that came up in previous volumes are one example of space beasts, and they’re known for being extremely aggressive. At this point in time, nobody has been able to communicate with them.

It’s unclear whether or not they’ll show up in this series, but there are other space beasts out there, like space sharks and space tuna. Neither can communicate. The former is unusually tenacious in its love for eating people, while the latter is dangerous for its willingness to charge in schools at fleets of ships or even entire colonies. Space marine life is scary, right? By the way, don’t you think it’s awesome how contradictory “space marine life” is? Oh, you don’t? Darn…

Well, I’d say it’s about time I wrapped this up.

Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank you to everyone who bought and read Volume 7.

Let’s meet again in Volume 8! I hope it comes out!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

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